

VOTE NO
ON AMENDMENT 1

We are unhappy



nothing is better
nothing is best
we are unhappy
we are unblessed

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THE PORCH

KATHERINE FAW

There are thirteen girls on a front porch. The two oldest rock in rocking chairs. They must be ninety years old in short-sleeve housecoats and white tennis shoes crossed at their ankles swollen to the same width as their calves. The next oldest sit in chairs of unmoving plastic. Their hair has some color still which is gray but it is just as short and set in hairdresser's curls. They wear blouses and slacks and they must be sixty and one of the three of them wears milky pink-framed glasses. Four stand up among the chairs in blue jeans and T-shirts and unreal blonde and real brown hair. They start in their forties and get better looking as they get younger. The pre-pubescent girls sit on the porch floor, all blonde, none of them smoking cigarettes. The oldest one gets to wear shorts but the youngest two wear milky pink cotton dresses. The baby is naked except for a reflective white diaper. She is bald still. She crawls among twelve pairs of feet wherever she wants. The porch is screened in. They are all covered by a fine lattice of wire. Up to the porch are three steps with the first sunken into scraggly grass coarse with sand spurs. On the left side a hydrangea bush shakes its thirteen purple puffs in the wind, coquetting for all of them. The sky has the deep daylight look of a storm. The women are watching what is out there which must be the road and they do not talk among themselves.



CAT PEOPLE

AMELIA GRAY

The woman walked past a long row of sweet mewling kittens to stop before a cage situated on its own by the door. Inside, two eyes glared at her from a mess of matted fur. The cat was moaning, and when Opal crouched down to get a closer look, it hurled itself at her, working its paw through the bars and drawing blood.

The information card on the cat seemed older than the others, yellowed and printed in a different style. The cat was sterilized, seven years old, and not cute, though the tangled orange fur looked like it would clean up nicely with a short bristle brush.

Opal brought her wounded hand to her mouth. "I want her," she said.

The woman working the cage room shook her head. "That's a terrible cat," she said. "Don't you want one of the sweet mewling kittens that came in last week? If you take this one, you'll only bring her back in a few days. You'll leave and she will be even meaner." The woman raised her arm, which was covered in scars. The cat yowled to corroborate.

"She's perfect," Opal said. "I'll love her forever."

An hour later, the cat was attacking the insides of a cardboard carrier from her passenger seat. "Not too much longer!" Opal said. "You're going to love it."

At home, she had arranged a welcoming spread: cans of wet food, a tufted cushion, a basket of toys. The cat leapt out of the

cardboard carrier and ran for the bed, where it immediately urinated on Opal's pillow.

"Okay!" Opal said. "This is all pretty new for you, I totally understand. Just so you know, this is a pillow where I sleep, and I generally don't love sleeping in pee. Welcome!"

The cat barged at a low window, scrabbling at the wood and screaming.

"That's a window!" Opal said. "Outside you'll find a three story drop to a busy street. I hope you understand such a choice would be painful for you. And that," she said, regarding the foot-long splinter the cat had excavated with its claws, "is a sharp piece of wood. I'll take it from you now, unless you insist on keeping it."

The cat insisted on keeping it. Opal stared at the ceiling all night, practicing her meditative breath and visualizing the mutual love and respect which would soon arise between them.

In the morning, her favorite books were destroyed, the pantry was turned out and dry goods were spread around the kitchen. There was a fresh turd in her coffee mug and a shredded nest of bills and essential documents. She picked through the mess, grateful for the reminder that these things weren't so important to her after all.

In the bathroom, the cat was sitting on the closed toilet lid, staring. Opal reached for it but the cat arched and howled.

"Thank you," Opal said. The cat shot towards her, mangling her arm in arching bloody ribbons before she pulled herself free.

She went to the kitchen, holding her throbbing arm, opened up a can of cat food, and spooned it into a porcelain dish. The cat leapt onto the table and took a bunch of bananas from their bowl, dragging them to its shredded paper nest.

Opal brought in extravagant cat toys and exotic food. The cat seemed to like the three-level cage she assembled in the center of the living room, though it definitely liked it more when Opal got inside to show off all the bells and ribbons. The cat came closer then, and she could hear it purring. It rubbed its matted side against the bars of the cage and allowed Opal to reach her fingertips through the bars to stroke it.

“That’s good!” Opal said. “Very good.” She slowly reached up to unlock the cage.

The cat made no move.

Opal pushed the door open and put one tentative foot out.

The cat looked up at her.

Opal was transfixed.

She took a single step forward, tripped on the lower bars of the cage and fell, hitting her head on the coffee table.

The cat took a few tentative steps towards Opal on the floor. It climbed onto the woman’s chest and leaned in close, whiskers twitching to sense her breath. It stretched its paw forward and batted at the woman’s unblinking eye until one of her claws caught her cornea, snatching it out with a practiced flick. From there, it had a scooping point to the brain.



KIWANO

LAURA VAN DEN BERG

One summer, when I was in the tenth grade, a brain-eating amoeba killed a boy I knew. This amoeba found him when he was river swimming in Florida, not far from where my sister and I lived, and after I heard that he died, and heard how he died, I wondered if an amoeba was eating my sister's brain too, only a little at a time. I thought this because when asleep she did things like roam backyards and sidewalks; get stuck in hall closets and hedges, in doghouses and treeforts. One night, she got lost in the cool florescence of a neighbor's open freezer, where she was found eating peppermint ice cream with her bare hands.

Later my mother would say *there was no way to know*, an excuse to fall back on randomness or god or the movements of the planets instead of owning up. There are moments that foretell the future, that create an unmistakable blotch on the horizon, an eclipse—it's all there if you want to see it.

For example.

When she was fifteen, my sister sleepwalked into a 24 hour 7-11. The cashier found her staring at the snack cakes—and then, he said, she disappeared. He went to call the manager and when he came back she was gone. As it turned out, she had just continued into the bathroom, where she turned on all the faucets, but when he put her name and the word “disappear” in the same sentence: the distant eclipse flared.

After the 7-11 incident, our parents took her to a psychiatrist, who referred her to a sleep specialist in Palm Beach, who prescribed

benzodiazepine and recommended installing alarms on the windows and doors. For a while the drugs seemed like a cure, but when we were in college on opposite ends of the state—I was where Ted Bundy got his start—she confessed on the phone that she still sometimes came to on a quad or in a parking lot. “Aren’t you ever afraid to go to sleep?” I asked her and she told me no: she was only ever afraid of waking up.

*

Years later, in a sleep clinic in College Park, I get the feeling my own story will not end well. When the doctor appears in the examining room, the first thing I think is: she looks exactly like my sister. And then I think: no, she absolutely does not. And then I think: yes, the more I look the more she does. And then I think: stop these crazy thoughts right this minute!

Dr. Ryan is the right age and height: early thirties, five-foot-eight. Her face is a perfect oval and her eyes are storm-sky blue and her ears stick out a little. The does so part of my brain overlooks the slight underbite and the bump on the bridge of her nose—for who is to say my sister could not have acquired those features over time?

She introduces herself as though we’ve never met. The does so part of my brain points out that my sister could be brainwashed or have amnesia; there is no evidence to prove otherwise. Dr. Ryan is reviewing the details of my upcoming overnight, but I keep firing back with questions about where she grew up and how long has she been practicing and does she remember what she did for her twenty-fifth birthday.

“My twenty-fifth birthday?” Dr. Ryan repeats. She adjusts her glasses, my sister never wore glasses, I keep going.

“What, may I ask, is your favorite fruit?”

My sister's was the kiwano melon, which we only knew existed because our mother studied abroad in Australia. A kiwano is orange and spiked and the insides look like a jellied cucumber.

Dr. Ryan frowns. "Whatever's seasonal, I guess."

Right then it's decided: I will bring Dr. Ryan a kiwano melon and see how she responds.

*

I first tried to tell my husband about my sister on our fourth date, at a tapas place on Virginia Drive: in the bright space of the restaurant, I felt compelled to unspool the part of my history that blotted everything else out.

He has a right to know, I thought as little white plates arrived. A slab of toast draped with silvery anchovies that made me think of wet laundry.

Put my wife in a beautiful setting and she will ruin it with a terrible story. Later this would be one of his many grievances.

When I got to the 7-11, my husband stopped me; I did not yet know him well enough to recognize his most annoying habit, the tendency to interject himself into whatever story I was trying to get out.

"My brother was a sleepwalker. He grew out of it, but when we were children he would sleepwalk into my bedroom and piss in my bed. I would wake up and find him holding his dick out like a hose."

Roasted tomatoes the size of human eyeballs appeared at our table.

"He was lucky to grow out of that," I said.

“I’ve never told anyone before.” His face went pale and shimmery. “About my brother, I mean.”

He excused himself to the bathroom and from there he sent a text, asking if I could get the bill. In the car, he apologized. He had become overwhelmed, he didn’t know what was wrong. Claustrophobia maybe. He had gotten sick, he had almost passed out. He repeated the fact of having not told anyone about his brother holding his dick out like a hose.

“It was hot in there,” I said. “Hot and crowded.” I watched dense trees pass through the window and felt relieved that his brother lived in Texas and I would not be meeting him any time soon. I took his hand. I kissed his knuckles, one-by-one. “Just so you know I sleep like a dead person. Soundly and lying down.”

*

Back then I was not lying to my husband. I just missed the signs.

I am thirty-two years old and work as a program coordinator for a university chemistry department. In recent months, I have misplaced e-mails and files; rescheduled meetings I was not asked to reschedule; failed to reschedule meetings I was asked to reschedule; fallen asleep at my desk; called professors and students by the wrong name. I move like I’m pulling bags of sand behind me. I have lost thirteen pounds. There has been a minor car accident. I have mistaken a trash bag for a deer. My skin feels like cold mud.

At night, I find a window and keep watch, blood burning; the trees have mouths and are trying to tell me things. I have undergone a physical, been prescribed medications that pack my skull with cotton. With a sleep therapist, I have done paradoxical intention and biofeedback. This therapist is the one who referred me to the

clinic, to better understand what is happening inside my brain.

According to my husband, during this sleepless period of my life, I have done things that are “deeply disturbing”—though I myself am in no position to judge the accuracy of this statement seeing as I have not slept normally in seventy-five days.

*

The clinic literature instructs me to avoid caffeine, alcohol, and naps prior to the overnight; it suggests I pack as I would for a hotel stay. The literature does not suggest I swing by the grocery and spend eight dollars on a kiwano melon; the literature does not suggest I toss the receipt on the way home and place the melon in my suitcase.

My husband and I live in a rented bungalow on Yates Street, not far from Lake Ivanhoe, and in the backyard we swat away insects in the damp, warm spring. The grass is a lush green, the air leaden from an afternoon rain.

A technician will stick sensors all over my body and these sensors are linked to wires and these wires are linked to computers. All through the night the technician will monitor my brain waves and breathing patterns and blood oxygen levels.

I read this part of the literature aloud to my husband, who wishes I was more like my parents: they planted a cherry tree in their backyard, in my sister’s honor, and then decided to never speak her name again.

On the fire escape, my husband is not listening. He is interrupting. He is saying something about how our lawyer called and Mart Collins is willing to drop the petition, that he is sympathetic, given the circumstances, but he will need certain assurances from me and he will need them in writing. And then I am not listening because the kiwano melon has appeared between us. Every time my husband

says “Mart Collins” the melon triples in size and soon I can’t see him at all. I dig my nails into the orange flesh. Between two thorns I carve an opening and crawl inside and wait to be suffocated by the green guts, but, to my surprise, I find that I am able to breathe.

*

Here is the part you have been waiting for.

The twenty-fifth birthday. The weekend in Daytona Beach. Has anything good ever come from a weekend in Daytona Beach? The hotel room on the thirteenth floor. From the window I could see golden sand; the rippling tide; a boardwalk.

We got pedicures and sunburns. We ate shrimp cocktails in bed, swaddled in plush bathrobes. Our official drink was the Dark and Stormy.

On the third night, I woke to find her covers turned back, her body gone. Later, on a grainy security video screen, I would watch her sleepwalking down the hallway, in a pair of unlaced sneakers, and knocking on doors—and I swear I knew what was going to happen before it did. A door would open. She would vanish into room 1315, occupied by one Mart Collins. The door would close. I would never see her again.

*

If my parents had foreseen the blotch on the horizon of her life, I wonder what they would have been willing to do. Have her institutionalized; frame her for a terrible crime so she gets life in jail; hire a chaperone who never sleeps; lock her away in a tower, like a princess in a fairytale; arrange for her to be put into a coma. In the middle of the night, any of these options seem reasonable to me.

*

Charlemagne was her favorite king. Quadratic equations is her favorite math. For the last five years, neither tense has sounded right.

*

After thirteen minutes in Mart Collins's room, they drove in his truck to an IHop. This was also documented by security cameras and eyewitnesses eating pancakes. In his statement, Mart Collins said my sister just wanted to talk, he never touched her. At the IHop, she ordered Double Blueberry Pancakes before disappearing into the bathroom, like she did in the 7-11, only this time she never came back. He says her last words were, "I'll have a Double Blueberry, please."

The "please" always stops me. It is unlike my sister to have said "please."

In the end, the police concluded Mart Collins was not guilty of a crime and not long after the investigation went cold. A sister never goes cold. After 23 days of not sleeping, I tracked Mart Collins down online. I started with the e-mails and the calls, to his office and then to his home. I left messages, I mailed letters, I mailed photos of my sister as a child.

All those hours in the night, I had to find a way to fill them.

In his statement, Mart Collins said it was hard to be a good person and being a good person can land you in trouble just as readily as being a bad person, as evidenced by his presence in an interrogation room. Yet my sister seemed troubled and he could not help but show kindness to strangers in need. That was his excuse for taking her to IHop at three in the morning. Anyone who gives a statement like that has to be guilty of something.

*

In the clinic waiting room, I notice a chart like the ones in optometrist offices, but instead of letters there are eyeballs of varying size, pulsing in the manner of anguished cartoon characters. I recall a TV program about a murder in Scranton: every night at four-thirty in the morning a mother heard the voice of her daughter, saying *postmark postmark postmark*. The woman's daughter had been murdered six months ago, her estimated time of death was four-thirty in the morning, and when the police finally investigated their mailman? Body parts in his freezer.

I wait for my name to be called.

*

In the examining room, the nurse recording my vitals informs me that I am not scheduled to see Dr. Ryan again until the results of my sleep study have come back.

"But I need to see her today." I picture handing the kiwano melon to Dr. Ryan, her hands closing around it like nightfall, the cloud of recognition crossing her face: *I am holding a thing I used to love*. "I have a gift for her."

"You'll make your next appointment at check-out. You can leave your gift with the receptionist." A stethoscope is looped around her neck; she holds the chestpiece in her palm. "Anyway Dr. Ryan is not in the office today."

Later, in a hallway, I pass the door with Dr. Ryan's name on it, letters etched across a little airstrip of brass.

*

When I learned Mart Collins had moved to Port Charlotte the next step was obvious. On day 61 of not sleeping, I drove away from College Park at dawn; my plan was to intercept him before he left for work. As I neared his house, I imagined finding my sister inside. All this time she had been alive and happy, just over 100 miles away. They had fallen in love, her and Mart. They had run away together because they knew their families wouldn't approve—Wait, why wouldn't we have approved?

This scenario was interrupted when a young woman answered the door. She was wearing black track pants and a sweatshirt, her hair pushed back from her forehead by a cloth headband. Apparently Mart Collins, who had recently broken his hip in a skiing accident, had a daughter.

"He's on painkillers," the daughter said. "He's asleep."

"I'm a friend," I said. "I heard about his accident. I'm here to visit. To help."

"A friend from where?"

"From Chicago." This was where Mart Collins was living when my sister disappeared.

"If you live in Chicago, what are you doing here?"

"We met on vacation," I said. "In Daytona Beach. Before he moved here."

A mistake. Her chest began to heave a little.

She slammed the door so hard the air vibrated. I lingered on the lawn and after we made eye contact through a downstairs window she ran around closing all the curtains and blinds. I watched the house go dark, one window at a time.

On the last leg home, near Sebring, I somehow drove into a telephone pole. In the Emergency Room, my husband wanted to know if I was afraid. He started rubbing my neck and though I knew his hand was on my skin, could picture his fingers counting vertebra, I couldn't feel a thing. *You can't let this define you*, he said next and it took all the love I had to not punch him in the face.

*

The clinic literature describes the rooms as comparable to hotel rooms, not inaccurate if the rooms in question are intended to resemble the worst of their kind. The walls are the color of a rancid pond, the bedspread itchy and mauve. There is no clock. A tiny black TV is mounted in the corner. The bed faces a one-way mirror and I think immediately of *Law & Order*.

The technician leaves me alone to change. I put on sweatpants and thick socks and a t-shirt with the slogan IF YOU'RE NOT PART OF THE SOLUTION YOU'RE PART OF THE PRECIPITATION, a gift from the chemistry department. The melon was wrapped in this T-shirt, so now it sits naked between my toiletries bag and sneakers. I push the suitcase under the bed.

My sister used to say sleepwalking felt like splashing around in a warm bath.

The technician returns holding an armful of white wires, clips and sensors dangling from the tips. "Time to get comfortable," he says.

He sticks sensors to my temple, scalp, torso. He fastens elastic belts around my chest and belly. White clips hang like earring from my ears. Another clip on my left index finger. The sensors are cold. They make me want to scratch until I see blood. The wires connect me to a cluster of standing monitors, like a person hooked up to life support.

I watch TV until lights out. Lo and Behold, *Law & Order* is on, and I remember my sister standing on her bed in Daytona Beach and reciting lines from Jack McCoy's best closing arguments. *Where does that other 18 thousand dollars go? To your Jaguar, your summer home, that 15 hundred dollar suit you're wearing now?*

*

There is one moment about that night I have never discussed with anyone—and try to avoid discussing with myself. How I woke at two-thirty in the morning and found her bed empty. How I glimpsed the closed bathroom door and the sheet of light on the carpet and felt my heart still: she was just using the bathroom, like anyone else's sister. How my brain was fogged with the last good night's sleep I would ever have and too many Dark & Stormys. How I did not open the door and make sure she was there.

*

In the clinic, in the dark of my room, I can't stop thinking about the kiwano melon and how it must be getting worried. The *does* so part of my brain reminds me of the office nameplate and how Dr. Ryan looked like a hard worker, a workaholic even—she could have snuck back to her office under the cover of night; she could be hunched under a desk lamp, examining files.

I press a button. The technician appears. I say I need the bathroom. He sighs and disconnects me from the machines. The clips snap as they slide off my ears. *Already?* I can tell he's thinking. He says he'll wait in the room.

"I might be a while," I say, and he leaves without another word.

*

In the hallway, as I make my escape, I hear two voices and at first I think it's the *does so* and *does not* sides of my brain, arguing again, but one voice sounds like my own and the other sounds different—and then I realize it's my sister, speaking from an invisible place.

You haven't slept in months, I try to tell myself, you're losing your grip. Shadows move like eels across the ceiling. I press the melon against my chest. *I am responsible*, I say and my sister tells me, *No, there were other forces at work*.

Briefly, a third voice: the technician chasing after me.

Then my sister drowns everything out.

*

A missing person can be anywhere, at any time. She could be Dr. Ryan or the homeless woman on the roadside or chained up in that passing van or rotting in a landfill or living in a convent, her sleepwalking cured by prayer. At any moment it is theoretically possible I will bump into her on the street, though it is also theoretically possible extensive plastic surgery has been performed, making her unrecognizable to me. The problem is not the absence of answers, but that there are too many answers—and no clear way to even begin.

I believe in all the answers, except the most obvious one.

Doors fly open. Night pricks my arms. My sister is telling me to forget Dr. Ryan, she is not who I want her to be. The kiwano melon is for Mart Collins, it is for bashing him in the face, and right then I understand I'm holding two things in my hands: the melon and my car keys.

I could drive to Port Charlotte and not stop for anything.

In the parking lot, I put the melon on the roof of the car and for a moment, I am seized by a terrible thought: I am going to run this melon the fuck over.

Not yet, my sister says.

I need a minute, I need to breathe, but my sister is saying go.

I look down.

Sneakers on, laces undone. How did they get there? The eclipse flares, and a near-futures self says, *I couldn't have done what you say. I don't even know how my shoes got on my feet.*



BRIEF HISTORIES OF WOMEN'S HEALTH

AURORA SHIMSHAK

State Park

Where Dad lived, there was an ice cave big enough for us all to stand in, a sandstone horseshoe with a thick overhang. Winters, I played Castle in the mouth, the icicles stretching from top to bottom, my walls. Summers, water dripped rain-like, catchable on outstretched tongues.

Dad

My sister and I made a stage from the sandstone ledge over the creek bed and sang from *West Side Story* for the adults below. I can still see him down there—big teeth, lip corners deep in his cheeks. That's what I'm trying to get back to, his face below, mid-clap.

Mom's sex talk

Said her first time she was seventeen, drunk in a car and the condom fell off. I asked if she had any advice. She said, "Use protection."

Planned Parenthood: Shawano, Wisconsin

Seventeen: He said we were getting close, so maybe we better get some. Went in his steel blue Jetta on a night neither of us had to work. Mist on windshield, smell of wet parking lot, fallen leaves. After, we ate sandwiches with provolone cheese at the pizza place he liked.

Planned Parenthood: Appleton, Wisconsin

Twenty-five: Across from us, a pregnant belly in a tank top, September light on the tops of heads. He sat next to me until my

name was called, but when I came back, he was gone. Found him in his car, window down, sucking on a cigarette. He said he couldn't be there. I didn't fight him on it.

Pill-induced

Held myself on the bathroom floor, listened to his pacing. Vomit, then diarrhea, him at the door asking if I was okay. Don't remember how much blood, just after, the Vicodin and his leaving. Next morning, called the secretary where I taught, put on a hoarse voice.

Choosing

He came over. I made Digiorno pizza, peed on the stick, waited. Couldn't eat after. Sat on the floor, leaned against the wall. Cried, but not about the rhythm method or the loss. Felt like my dad could see me. Said it before I knew, my certainty startling.

Vision

I knew I'd get the abortion for the same reason I knew I had to leave. I saw a ranch house on a street of other ranch houses, a chain-link fence, a small, plastic slide in the yard.

Without Protection

Mostly thought of the yellow dress I wore the second time, Anthropologie via Goodwill, ruffled hem, ribbon straps. Caught him staring at my freckled thighs in the passenger seat. After, wanted it to still be perfect, soft grass, valley sun going liquid peach.

Accusation

When they got divorced, my stepmom said my dad paid for three of his daughters' abortions. First thought: not mine. Second thought: pill bottle, the orange kind. As if that would tell her, for the real problem, look under here.

Waiting Room

Always think the politicians should have to go and sit there for an hour, get squeezed by the arm rests, hear the sounds. There'd be a

rule about how long they had to look at every face. Then you could ask them, "If not this, what? What are you going to do for us?"

Reflection

A word that repeated was embryo, and the fact about tenths of inches. I fought with all the politicians in my head. *It wasn't conscious.* And softer, *I wouldn't have been able to love it.*



IN DREAMS

ASHLEIGH BRYANT PHILLIPS

This feels like a really long shower, the way the water's moving down my body. Maybe it's because my eyes are closed. I move my tongue in my mouth and think that hole in my gums is getting bigger. I don't know how it happened or what it's for. I'm too high to be able to tell if I'm just high as hell or really falling into another depressive episode. Like getting pulled by an undercurrent and not knowing when I can come up for air. Riding around this morning I thought I ought to press that pocket knife into my skin some to see how fast the blood would come out. I did take note of that.

And I am fully aware I ain't even washing, just standing in the water, rinsing off. My sister's damn pool has so many pine needles and leaves, moss floating at the bottom. That's where I swam to, tried to see if I could lay down there in it. Rub my belly on it. I figured it would be soft.

"Don't you get into that water. It's September," my sister hollered off the back porch, "You'll get pneumonia."

I almost died from double pneumonia when I was in first grade.

But I told her that if she don't want a pool in September then to get her lazy ass up and take it down. Her damn boyfriend won't do it, that old fucker. He's old enough to be our damn daddy.

When I came in the house that fucker was sitting there looking at Wheel of Fortune.

I looked right in his face when I came in and told him that nasty

water felt good.

"I reckon it did," he said.

Back at my old place it was hard. It was like when you come out of the shower and you're so cold and you want to be warm and you dig through your drawer for some pants and you pull out his pants, your man's pants, 'cause you've felt him in them before.

'Cause you've been riding around looking over to your right wanting to feel his knuckles between your teeth. But you haven't seen your man in months and you don't know when you'll ever see him again.

"Let me see your eyes," the old fucker says to me from the recliner.

I bend down low enough in front of him that he could yank the towel right off of me there if he wanted to. Strange for a sister to be living with her sister and her sister's boyfriend but that's what I've been doing. And I knew this fucker was a dick before, but now it's just more apparent.

He's a piece of shit. Sister's tires are slick as anything and she's got to drive to Hertford County to work back and forth everyday and he won't give her no money to help her get new tires. That's something My Man would never do. He always paid for my mama's meal every time we went up to the café for Sunday lunch. Made me so mad when I found out that old fucker was letting my mama pay for his Sunday lunch.

The old fucker cuts his hair close to his head to hide that he's balding. With my sister so young and pretty he wants to fit in. But I can see the bald spots looking pale from the TV.

"You're crazy as hell," he says.

"That's right," I tell him.

He calls my sister from the kitchen.

She comes in cradling a bowl in one arm and mashing potatoes into the wall of the bowl with the other.

"I told you, just look at her. High as a damn kite," he says it like I ain't there.

My hair is dripping wet on my shoulders. Collecting in my collarbones. I'm getting cold.

Old fucker says if I won't kin he'd take me to Jackson and throw me in jail. He's a state trooper. He thinks he's hot shit. He says if he goes in the bathroom again and there's weed ashes on the counter. He says weed like "weeeeeeeeeeeeeed."

My sister stops him and looks at me like she's saying "Why" but instead she says, "Go on and put some clothes on. Supper will be ready here presny." "Presny" is an old word that we learned from the old people in our family who raised us.

My sister loves me. But we're really different. We disagree on things she don't understand. Like if I got pregnant, she don't understand how I couldn't at least carry the baby. See I couldn't carry it and have it and give it up for adoption. I'd want to hold it and then I'd want to keep it. So that's why I'd need an abortion. But Sister thinks that's wrong.

My sister keeps the bulletins from all the children's funerals she's gone too. She keeps them in the side pocket of her car. I never knew that until one time on the way to church I was talking about something I don't remember now. About life not being fair probably, but that it's only our one life to live and she pulled them bulletins out at the stop sign and showed them to me. She works at a daycare. She knows lots of children. She said, "This family has lost an innocent child. They had their whole life ahead of them."

She also clearly believes in God and she believes in the best in people. When she prays to God she feels better. But not me.

Maybe that is part of my problem— I have not gone to the Lord about My Man yet.

My sister has a full length mirror behind her bedroom door. I like to look at my full self naked there. I've got a dark hair growing out of my left nipple and I pull it out. Then I think I want someone to choke me. Or bite my lip until it bleeds. I'd like someone to slap me in the face. It's good seeing how much you can take. It'll surprise you. The more it hurts the better it feels when you're finally released.

But no man can touch me now. Only My Man.

I'm all hairy everywhere now. No need to shave because I am a nun except when I masturbate and that is like cosmic sex above me. That is when I remember the time like for example when we walked into my kitchen and My Man picked me up and then on the counter, then kitchen table, then floor. It was dark and the porch light came in from the window. He picked me up in his arms then and was in me from under so fast. I was in the air, flying like magic.

Last time I masturbated I touched myself to the idea that all my dead family that I knew and loved are reunited in heaven. And they weren't watching me but they were on a big TV being happy together and hugging each other. And I was watching them and I was very happy. It was nice to see them smiling with each other. They missed each other so much when they were alive.

I put on a real skimpy tank top and Soffe shorts Sister used to wear for softball practice, something to show my scars from where I was in the hospital in that freak accident where they fucked me up when they were taking out my appendix, that's a whole 'nother story but I'll tell ya this: I laid there for three months and My Man came to kiss me on the forehead and tell the nurses I needed more morphine. They shot it straight into my veins, right into my arms. The fat red headed nurse shot it in me the fastest and that always felt best like a band of angels was beating their wings so graceful together at the top of my head, making warm waves come down into my body.

I'd wake up to people from church at the end of my bed praying.
Or Daddy shaking his head, saying I was cut open like a hog.

When I was twelve, my cousin gave me a Norton anthology of American literature she used in college. That was the first time I saw a poem that didn't rhyme. That was the first time I read Sylvia Plath. An associates in arts from Halifax Community College don't get you much nowhere, but I wrote all my papers on Ariel anyways. That's when I read "Lady Lazarus" and "Fever 103." *All by myself I am a huge camellia, glowing and coming and going, flush on flush.* I didn't know what that meant then but I thought it sounded magnificent. And I felt sad for no reason.

"Take it easy, just don't worry so much," Mama said when I was so afraid of the book of Revelations at night when I was a little girl and would cry and cry. She'd have to hold me until I fell asleep. I just kept thinking about the floor ripping open. Looking outside and seeing fire coming down. Raining fire outside the window.

And that's one of the things, I think. My Man claimed he was an atheist. He said he didn't need anyone or anything to pull him out of trouble. He said he just needed himself. How if his legs had just got broken and he was on the road in the middle of the desert without a phone, if he remembered someone said to dig a hole with your ring finger and spit in it and mix it around five whole times that you'd survive and get out of that desert, he said he wouldn't do it.

And then I didn't tell him I'd been feeling my heart pulling towards another and I laid down with that other one night and I didn't let him touch me but that other told me how we're all made of stars and we really do make up the universe and are made of the universe and how powerful and lonely that felt at the same time and how that's the origin of the species and only then did I remember My Man. I had never heard that before and I was afraid. I went back to My Man and didn't tell him about it.

I met My Man online. We matched on OkCupid. He misspelled *The Picture of Dorian Gray* in his profile. I've never read it but had

enough sense to know how it's spelled. So I told him. And then he had a good strong name and then he asked for my number and then he was gonna see me for New Year's Eve but he got in a wreck on the way to see me. I didn't know to believe him or not. But it was true. He totaled his truck but he made it out without a scratch.

Then we met in real life kinda on a Google hangout. I could hear his voice and see how it came out of him. He was sitting on his living room sofa showing me all these little vases and samurai swords. His granddaddy had been an international antique dealer. Sacred soap stones from India. It's like he had them all in a pile sitting next to him on the couch where I couldn't see. I was waiting for a shrunken head, for him to hold it by the hair and spin it in front of the camera. He kept bringing them up asking me if I could see them, as if to say, "Look at this, look at this."

All I know is the girl he's seeing now lives in Asheboro and that's where the zoo is. And I bet you a million dollars that they've already been there. He drives up on a Friday night in that dirty ass stick shift truck that I promised him I'd clean for his birthday. Filled with papers and receipts and bags and clothes and towels and camping gear. Listens to cassettes I used to surprise him with all the time like Hank Williams. Driving up there and taking her out to a good dinner. I seen on Facebook that she's got pink hair. I hope he doesn't get so excited talking to her like he would with me, talking so fast that he'd have to stop and suck in that little bit of slobber that was about to drip out his mouth. Them nice lips so pretty that I cry. I hope she don't sound as good as me when they kiss. When she climbs him like a monkey in the kitchen like I used to do. Putting his head under my chin and reaching for the cumin, he'd laugh and say it, "Coming."

He'd go with me to visit Daddy in the nursing home. Be there to put his hand on my back. Daddy is sick with a disease I don't wanna mention because I don't want you to try to relate to me or say your grandma had it. I don't want you to feel sorry for me. And because of this disease that Daddy is still dying of, Daddy never knew My Man's name. But before Daddy forgot how to talk he said he liked My Man. I sat next to Daddy and he said, "He'd do anything for

you, if you asked him.”

And then My Man wakes up in the morning with that Asheboro girl's head on his chest. And I get so sick thinking about it. And then they go to the zoo and look at the seals swimming in the water. They stop and ask an elderly but energetic couple to take their picture. One of those nice couple pictures you see all the time where they stand together smiling with his hand on her waist and her hand placed on his stomach as if she's holding him back. My Man is so handsome. They tell the nice old lady to take a couple of pictures because they want a seal behind them in it. My Man makes a joke. He's good with all sorts of people. I hope they don't get the seal in the picture.

Next thing I know I am half way under my sister's bed just laying there with my eyes closed. Maybe I am meditating. It's nice down here like being in a coffin.

I heard a story once about getting buried alive. They accidentally buried the man face down and he woke up and clawed and clawed at the coffin. Clawing to hell in a way. And his ghost came to his best friend's bedside for three nights in a row telling him to come and dig him up. When they finally did and they dug him up and saw how afraid his dead face looked in the eyes, they buried him right side up. And from then on caskets was made with a rounded top to them.

I thought about that story when we were at Aunt Ginny's wake the other day. And I thought I'm glad they are burying her right side up so she'll be looking towards heaven. Or at the Second Coming when she sits up, she'll just be able to step right on out. She looked so pretty in the casket and I felt bad that I never went to visit her more than I did when she got real bad down in the bed. Her hip bone had pushed through her skin. Her legs were stuck in fetal position. But she fit in the casket so I guess they broke them to get her in there right. I didn't ask.

My sister has all of Daddy's little model airplanes he built. She's

got them in special shelves in her living room. The old fucker says we could sell them for good money and Sister went behind my back and gave him some to sell. That burned me up so bad. That fucker kept the damn money. Bought a new gun for Dove Day 2016, first day of dove season.

That couple on Chestnut Street got Daddy's chopping block that he was so proud of. That he got when the butcher uptown closed. He loved that damn thing. Mama hated it 'cause it took up so much room in the kitchen. Right there in the middle of the kitchen. That's where they pinned me down to make me swallow medicine. And that's where we ate watermelon. Daddy would take our hands and show us, make us feel where the wood had worn down and got deep, where the meat had been cut up the most. We don't really know the folks who have it. I mean like who all they came from. They got it when the bank took the house after Daddy got sick and we went bankrupt. Don't know how much Mama sold it for. I bet for not enough.

I smell that Sister's started frying the pork chops. I push myself out from under the bed and look at myself in the mirror again before I head down the hall. My sister is making what I liked to eat when I was little. Mashed potatoes and then you put some peas in the middle and call it "eggs in a basket."

I'm opening a can of Le Sueur peas when she says to me, "You know I thought you and that nice looking guy you were always so close to in high school would make a good couple. You and him."

She flips a pork chop. "He always played that guitar so good. What did he play, that Hotel California song at all the home games?"

"Exactly." I pour the peas in the pot. "That's basic. The Eagles."

"He's moving back soon, you know? From grad school to work on his daddy's tree farm," she says, "As pretty as you are. I know he'd love to go out with you. Slim pickings round here."

This is the first time my Sister has ever talked to me like this, pushing some man on me.

I finally tell her that I'm writing a letter to My Man. I haven't told no one. I've taken all summer to do it. I'm afraid to send it. I don't want it to be the last time I talk to him.

"What all does it say?" She reaches in the cabinet for plates.

"What's in my heart," I tell her. "How every time I dream about him I wake up crying." I can feel myself starting to fall to pieces.

"Maybe it's better if you let it ride, let it play itself out." Sister puts the plates on the table and puts her hand on my arm. "He's already seeing someone else, Sister. I mean it's been what, like, almost a year?"

And I fall to pieces right there in the kitchen floor. And my sister's there, picking me up, telling me that it's time for me to be taking care of myself. "We don't need no man," she says. She's wiping my face with a warm dishrag. "We're strong, Sister," she says.

And that's when the old fucker walks in and asks me if I ran off my meds again and if I need money for the damn refill. If I was that tight for money he'd fucking throw me some dollars since I can't seem to get myself together to get them myself.

So I end up sitting at the table because like Sister said, we are strong and I do need to eat the favorite meal from my childhood that she's made for me. I need to be healthy so that I can carry a child someday, to be a mama someday.

Sister asks the blessing. She thanks God for earlier today when she went to see Daddy and he saw her and was able to say "Baby girl." She asks God to protect Mama when she's closing at the liquor store in Rich Square. Mama works three part-time jobs to keep Daddy in that nice home. I'm trying to find a job you know but it's hard. And Sister asks God to be with me too. That's it. Just for

God to be with me.

And the old fucker says “Amen” real loud like he’d been waiting for it to be over.

Jeopardy comes on and there’s a whole column on the Black Plague. I am good at history.

And when My Man found out that the old fucker liked history too he said, “Look honey, here’s something you can talk to him about. Here’s a way to get to know him a little better. Do it for your sister.”

I thought how wonderful and sweet and caring My Man was to say that and I say to the old fucker, “You wouldn’t think it but I know a lot about the Black Plague.”

The old fucker swallows the damn mouthful he has in and says, “Oh yeah, let’s see who gets the most answers right.”

And I don’t want it to be a competition. I don’t want it to go like that. So I say all I remember from the Black Plague was from where I was in the hospital and as high as I was on straight morphine injections in that port they ran through my arm straight to my heart, that documentary was the only thing I could understand. That when women found out they were sick, they would sew themselves up in their own death sacks made of cloth or burlap or whatever medieval thing was around so they wouldn’t spread the disease to their loved ones. They’d tell their family, “As much as I fight to get out, don’t let me.”

And then I get up and say, “There is a charge for the eyeing of my scars there is a charge for the beating of my heart, see it still goes and there is a charge.” I’m pointing at my scars on my arms, standing at my sister’s dinner table.

Sister just looks at her plate with big eyes.

The old fucker gets up from the table and says, “Some people just need to get their ass whooped.”

I help my sister clean up. If that old fucker really loved my sister he'd help her clean up. He'd help her get some tires riding to the next county raining like it is. If he loved her he'd give her that ring she wants. But he thinks our family is white trash and I think this because when our daddy was first in the nursing home and Mama didn't know how to deal and Sister came home and found her so drunk she was throwing up on herself in the bathtub, knowing that everyone around here knows our family needs prayers, that old fucker took advantage of my sister and put her reputation on the line and asked her to move in with him and his fourteen-year-old daughter when my Sister's twenty-four years younger than him and had never lived on her own. Also I had a nightmare one time that he made her pregnant and then he had to marry her.

I dry and put up the last plate and go and grab my wallet off the damn end table and sling the dollar bills I have at the old fucker on the recliner and say, "Here's some money for condoms."

"Some people just need a real good ass whoopin," he says to my sister in the kitchen. He's looking at the dollars on his gut.

The night that me and My Man had sex on a Civil War battlefield we decided we'd name our daughter after it. It was a battlefield we'd never heard of, with the most pretty name. But I won't say that name. I don't want to jinx it. It's something only me and My Man know.

I've been writing about that future said daughter. We always said she'd have my hair and his eyes. I've been writing about me and him raising her. Me sitting on the toilet watching him bathe her. Him telling her to hold her head back so the soap doesn't get in her eyes.

The first time I met My Man in real life, I had to find him in an antique store walking behind armoires and gun cabinets. He was the most beautiful thing I'd ever seen. Next time I saw him, I read him a poem I wrote for him. We were sitting in his truck on top of a

bridge and I told him, "Let me be your shaman."

A few weeks after we broke up, I won't sad yet because I have been told that I compartmentalize things and he texted me referring to the shaman line. I texted back "What?" I didn't remember what I had told him. And I'm ashamed of that.

I am standing in my sister's living room and American Ninja Warrior is on. No one can make it past the spider crawl. The old fucker has not picked the dollars off his gut.

I know it makes my sister upset that me and the man she loves don't get along. I told her at Sunday lunch that I am trying to make peace with them being together but it's very uncomfortable for me. To which my mama was there and she overheard me and she said that her and my sister could have been really rude to My Man after he gave me herpes but they didn't. "Something you'll have to live with for the rest of your life and might have effects on your children."

My sister is saying something to me from the kitchen. I think she's telling me to stay in. I'm not really paying attention to her because that hole in my mouth is hurting me. It almost always hurts after I eat. Food gets caught in it and I got to dig it out with my tongue or it'll get to tasting funny in my mouth. I haven't told Sister about that because that would be another thing she could hold against me. Another reason how I don't take care of myself. And if I can't take care of myself, I'll never be able to raise a family.

My keys are in my hand and I just run out the house. I drive to where all my family is buried. I ain't been out there in months.

It's still light out enough for me to see all the corn fields around the cemetery. I think more than any other crop, corn can really change a landscape 'cause it grows so tall. Look over it one day and you can see a house at the edge of the field, look another day and the house is gone. But this corn here looks strange. Just like tall stalks that ain't been cut down yet. They don't even have any ears

on them. It's like they never grewed. They never got enough rain during the summer. And I feel bad for that farmer.

I pull the weed and my piece out my glove box. I got the piece because the color green reminded me of all those green glass vases Aunt Ginny had in her sunroom.

I get out the car and go see where Aunt Ginny is buried. The grass on top of her looks like golden brillo pad from where it ain't grewed in with the other grass. But I know it will someday and she won't always be covered with a brillo pad carpet. And I ain't even high again yet.

I go sit where Granddaddy is buried. He's been dead five years now and don't have a headstone 'cause we can't afford it. That's also a bad feeling.

I take a hit and I feel it burn in my throat and when I exhale I feel like ghosts are coming out of me and I know that's lame and cliché right here at what might be called the emotional initial wound of the story. But almost everyone I know is already dead. Count them with me right here. There's Granddaddy and Grandma. There's Uncle Peachy and there's Aunt Ginny. There's Great Grandmama. And there's Mema. And then there's the ones I never knew in real life but they're walking in my head. There's Big Mama and Uncle Perry next to her. There's baby Stephen who died when he was three months old. There's Aunt Essie and her brother, my Great Granddaddy who was bow legged.

At the old home place, I can look at pictures of them when they were young, and look out in the side yard and tell where they were standing. Long before they knew I'd ever be born. And I get Sister's fancy iPhone and take pictures of them and send them to my phone and I post them to Facebook. But no one knows them like me. They just look at my profile and think, "Oh there she is posting old black and white pics of her family again. I don't know them but I am going to like the pic anyway because maybe she knew them and maybe she misses them." And I am sad because no one is gonna know my family's stories because they were unimportant in

the grand scheme of things. They made it through life without killing themselves and that is extraordinary enough for me.

Just like I don't know how Daddy didn't kill himself when he knew he was going to lose his mind and end up starving to death because he would forget how to swallow. Mama had to hide the guns in the house. And Daddy somehow was able to go to sleep at night.

Last time I saw him his feet was swole with fluid from a urinary tract infection and he was barefoot 'cause he'd hid his shoes in another patient's room. His toenails were longer than I'd ever seen them in my life. His pants were falling off of him and he kept trying to take them off. The calendar in his room had not been turned over to the new month. He'd peed on the blanket on his bed. It smelled in the corner on the floor. The nurse came in and told me and Sister that he'd taken a shit right in the middle of the dining room floor earlier in the week. And that he walked the halls at all hours of the night. He wouldn't lay down to sleep. We brought him candy. We had to show him how to eat it. He said three words. We couldn't make any of them out. I sat on his bed and looked out the window. I wanted to throw everything I could out of it. Including my body.

I look at pictures of Daddy when he was little on my phone before I go to sleep.

And in my dream world, I'd be leaning against his tombstone right now in this cemetery. I'd feel my backbone ridge into the letters that make up our last name. Then I'd push my shoulder blades out and push them into the stone as hard as I could.

I don't even know who is gonna pay for his tombstone when he dies either.

I hear some gunshots out back towards town. Folks stole the refrigerator out of the parsonage last week when the Preacher was visiting the homebound. A girl from Ahoskie shot a man and his son over the weekend. Papers ain't said why yet. Mama says,

“You’ve really got to love this place to stay.”

And I take another hit, pull in deeper now. And I feel all my family out here under me and remember it ain’t my life I’m living, it’s theirs.

There was a time when I couldn’t even get out of the bed. I couldn’t even eat or stand up straight. Mama put makeup on my face and when I opened my eyes people those people at the end of my bed told me I was a miracle. I could smell all the flowers they brought me, rotting all around me in that tiny little room.

“There is a charge,” the hole in my mouth says. That hit I just took then was real deeper. It’s dark now and the smoke rises up to the moon. This is a good place now. My head doesn’t feel like it’s about to knock against the sky. That’s a reference to an e.e. cummings poem, about being so filled up with love you don’t know what to do. I could recite it right now, *What should I say when we shall meet? Yet I lie here thinking of you.*

If I dug all the way down to Aunt Ginny right now I could not make myself a baby again in her arms under the earth. I see myself as a baby in her coffin arms in the nook between her ribs and little arm. The baby me in her dead arms. Curls in both our hair.

And Daddy won’t be there to pick me up. If I get back home tonight, he won’t be there reading an auto trader in the living room. And he won’t be there in the morning to give me and Sister bowls of grits, to ask us if the little rats had a dance in our hair last night. To brush the tangles out.

And when we lost the house, me and Sister were cleaning out our bedrooms upstairs and there were so many doll babies we didn’t want to save. “Don’t you want to keep these for your little girls,” Mama said. They told us that if we left a mess in the house it didn’t matter. The bank didn’t care. Me and Sister threw our doll babies into the wall. Their heads busted open and we left them like that in the floor.

The last text I sent My Man was thirteen days ago, asking him if he still listened to that Roy Orbison tape I gave him. And how I listen to “In Dreams” now every night over and over because “In dreams I walk with you, in dreams I talk with you.”

But in my dreams My Man looks at me like I’m a stranger. And like I said, I wake up crying.

Because even though when I asked My Man if he wanted me to disappear, he said no. He told me to do what I needed to do. Which was asking about that Roy Orbison tape. And I haven’t heard from him and I know I may never hear from him again.

The green’s floating at the bottom of my sister’s swimming pool like graceful moving jellyfish. I could drown there.

Or in the ocean. Daddy’d take us once a year. Throw us in and say, “This’ll get the ticks and fleas off ya.”

That’s where I came up from the water and spat water in My Man’s face for the first time. Then every shower. Except not the one I took earlier today. He won’t there. I don’t even remember now our last shower. We would wash each other’s hair.

I want to be warm. I want to hold My Man’s hand. I have to believe that one day I’ll be able to show My Man now the tops of the tombstones are silver little fingernails. A field full of half moons.

The last time we argued was about me going to the dentist. He said I needed to go. That he’d pay for it. I said I wouldn’t ‘cause as soon as I opened my mouth the dentist would say “You’re a dumbass,” and I’d say, “No I’m just poor.” And I didn’t want to have to say that.

I remember being in Christian camp and the Preacher made us feel like it was us who put Jesus on the cross. My sins of jealousy and not singing enough songs that praised the Lord. *In the sweet by and by*

we will meet at that beautiful shore.

My body belongs to some creator. And I move because of it.

And I was taught every sin I committed was a strike into Jesus's back, ripping it open. We all watched that movie together in youth group, Passion of the Christ, laying in the floor of the fellowship hall, for a sleepover. Jesus had to pull himself up with the nails in his wrists, not in the middle of the hands which is traditionally what art says, and push himself up from that long nail in his ankle in order to take a breath because of the weight of gravity.

Paul wrote, "I rejoice in my suffering." And later, "For when I am weak, I am strong."

A hit. A hard one. I cough real bad. My stomach muscle cramps from where I was cut open like a hog. And I'm bending over, holding myself on the ground.

My Man is fucking his girl in the truck, in the zoo parking lot and she doesn't know where to brace her feet to make it best but he doesn't care. Because he's not thinking about me right now.

I'd like to be hit even harder.

I bite my wrist as hard as I can and I get back in my car. I check my phone and I've got a bunch of missed calls from my sister. She says Daddy's home called. And Daddy was playing moving his cup all around his plate like he always does now, dropping bread in it. And another resident got upset about it and punched him twice in the face. Sister says Daddy didn't fight back. He won't even bruised but they had him on seventy-two hour watch during which they would check on him every thirty minutes. She is on the way to see him. I tell her I love her.

Driving now is floating just above the road and all around me is the

flat, flat land. The tall shadows of the woods cut between the fields and sky. I really like the feeling when you're choking and he holds you down longer than the time before. More and more closer every time to a place I didn't know.

I want to see Daddy's chopping block. So I drive to that house on Chestnut Street. I will go up and ring the doorbell. If no one comes I will punch the window next to me and see if I can unlock the door. If no alarm goes off I will make my way inside.

No lights are on in the house. The chopping block is in the middle of the kitchen floor just like old times. The knives are next to the stove and the one I want to use is good and sharp. I spin the tip into the end of my finger like the movies.

The fridge's got an untouched, brand new rotisserie chicken. I'm another person in another time with my same blood running through me, standing on the back steps, looking at my great grandma in the backyard holding the chicken above her head, breaking its neck with the flick of her wrist.

I grab the chicken where its neck ends and put it on the chopping block. I stab it, rip it in two. Down into the bottom of the valley in the chopping block. Where Daddy showed me the wood wore down when I was little. Where the butchers cut the meat up the most.

I know both how to be abased, and I know how to abound; everywhere and in all things I am instructed both to be full and to be hungry, both to abound and to suffer need.

I'm being still now to listen. To see if God will have anything to say.

I hear the steps coming to me of a little child. One I can tuck into bed by reading a book.

Before she goes to sleep tonight, my sister's saying a special prayer for that little one-year-old boy down the road who shot himself in

the heart with a staple gun.

But the sound is not from a child, it's a light coming on and that couple coming on either side of me. They're telling my name to me and they're telling me it's ok. "Calm down, now," they're saying with calm faces.

The chicken meat sticks to me like slugs. I want to go home and cry in my bed. I want to cry until I am empty.

They have taken away the knife and are on either side of me, leading me out the house. They have soft arms. The woman is stroking my arm. The man gets in a car and the woman stands in front of me. She holds both my shoulders. She says, "Let's get you home." She pulls meat out of my hair.

They turn the heat on in the car and it feels so nice. I remember to tell them that I'll fix their window. I don't know how, but I'll do it.

And they say "Ok."

They don't ask me where I live. Everybody already knows.



HOW THE DOGS WERE LOST

CHRISTINE STROUD

In the desert, the coyotes sing
into the night. Calling out the dogs,

calling them to come out and be killed.
And the dogs want to go. They paw and whimper—

so incessant. It's appealing to unlock the door,
let them push the screen open

into the wide, black sky. Those dumb dogs
think it's dogs calling them, calling them out

to fuck or be fucked. How does it feel?
Oh, that moment you realize you've been had,

that you've been brought and taken. I know,
the song was sweet, but wasn't it suspicious?

Somedays I'm envious of their ease in committing
to that crooked temptation. In the desert

the coyotes sing to the dogs until the dogs come
until the howling mingles and becomes indecipherable.



WHAT IS SACRED

WENDY C. ORTIZ

Another afternoon had fallen over the clinic, the morning bustle turned sleepy lull. In the waiting area, the patients seemed more sedate than I'd come to expect on such days. Perfumes mingled in the air and dissipated with every opening of the door as patients or their companions entered or left, some smoking cigarettes on the front steps, ignoring the protesters in the parking lot. I was invited to leave the front desk and enter the small hallway where a doctor and certified nursing assistant stood, focused on the countertop in front of them. I left the medical charts on my desk, neatly aligned in a pattern that showed the order of patients from first to last.

I was told to put on a blue paper smock, paper mitts, and a mask. My fingers felt unsure touching the crinkly paper. The doctor's gaze was fixated on a tray.

"This one's about nine weeks." The doctor studied and turned over the little bits of blood and matter in the tray with an instrument. Our very pregnant CNA took notes.

Seeing organs, tissue, bone—things that should by all accounts be on the *inside* suddenly *outside*—normally made me squeamish. I stood over the tray and blinked. My focus on the tray blotted out the sounds of the clinic, the unfamiliarity of this mask on my face. There were definite features to the fetus, features I had never envisioned seeing up close—the minuscule hands, smaller than a grain of rice; the curve of the backside reminiscent of a shrimp. When I let out my breath, thoughts wheeled wildly around my head, silly thoughts, untethered feelings. *This is it! I'm seeing it!*

I heard myself say some things, words meant to relay to the medical professionals around me that I was fine, just fine. Not in awe. Not amazed that what I was looking at looked, of course, like what it was—a minuscule human—then alternately like what it wasn't—a tiny shrimp tossed ashore from the ocean. I watched as the medical instruments prodded, turned, measured. My nostrils flared under the mask.

I observed the fetus as it was surveyed and reported (because any remains of the fetus left in the woman's uterus can cause complications). I tried to imagine what I was seeing juxtaposed with the enlarged images of aborted fetuses on Operation Rescue signs. My gaze could never linger long on those signs, with their spattered blood, some version of mangled skin and clotted hair that looked forged to my earnestly pro-choice eyes, mind, and heart. The doctor's voice brought me back as she suggested that I'd be a good candidate to help with noting fetal measurements on future abortion days. I was pleased with the doctor's suggestion. I thought it meant something about my composure, my professionalism—even as in that moment it seemed that standing upright and being willing was enough. Add a blue smock, mitts, a mask, and I was on my way.

I was the receptionist at the only feminist women's health care facility that offered abortions in my adopted county in the Pacific Northwest. To me, this was a pro-choice activist's dream job. I'd been hired quickly, by surprise. When I'd first applied for the open position, they'd filled it with someone who had a medical-office background. Then, a few months later they called to offer me the position. I didn't even ask what happened to their previous hire, why there had been such a swift turnaround. I was anxious to leave the monotony of my state job, and the fact that I myself had traveled a couple of counties away for an abortion just five days earlier made the job seem possibly fated.

I'd embarked on my activist dream job in earnest. Now I was looking

at the remains of a fetus in a tray with a sense of awe I couldn't yet place.

I encountered Michael in various places, but we were officially introduced at an editorial meeting in the local library. I had volunteered to proofread for the local progressive newspaper that he wrote for, edited, pasted up, and distributed. Michael could alternately be found testifying on behalf of the homeless at city-council meetings, observing police officers downtown, facilitating a collective's meeting, and riding his bike with an almost purposeful recklessness on the streets.

Months passed, months in which I tasted his signature specialty of spaghetti with avocado, shared beers at the alehouse, went to newspaper meetings. I watched Michael walking toward me in his long-sleeved shirt, black jeans, and boots, and I knew I wanted this life of action, fiery and fluid, and I wanted to do it alongside him. By the time Michael and I had been together for a year and living together for several months, various meetings populated my calendar, along with marches, Critical Mass bike rides, and teach-ins.

One rally stands out to me. It was early February, and the faint sun took some of the chill off the crowds gathered at the capitol building, readying to march to the park. There are photos of me holding a megaphone, standing in the park's gazebo. When Michael lugged the video equipment down to the march that morning, I had silently hoped that the video he shot that day would not be memorable for anything other than the rally we were participating in.

After the march from the capitol building to the rally itself, the last thing I wanted to do was travel to the west side of town for what would be my first pregnancy test ever. But later that afternoon, I left behind a urine sample at the HMO clinic and was told I could call for the results after four.

The rally was long over, but my throat was still scratchy from the chanting and yelling we'd done that day. I waited until just after four as instructed. I sat on the couch and punched the numbers on the phone.

A perky female voice answered. After telling her the reason for my call, she asked, "Which way do you want it to be?"

I started to say something, sighed, said nothing.

"The test came out positive," she replied after an awkward moment. My breath caught in my throat. Another moment of silence eclipsed everything until she said, "It sounds like that's not the news you wanted. Here's who to contact."

I was twenty-four, several months shy of twenty-five; a few weeks prior, newspapers around the country noted the twenty-fifth anniversary of *Roe v. Wade*. I hung up the phone, stunned into silence. I had crashed into my fertility.

I'd always felt like I was on one side of a fence; my friends who had abortions stood on the other side. I was holding their hands through this fence, but we were separated. I was perfectly content to stay on my side of the fence for as long as possible, if not forever.

Back then, I often collected statistics and rational, practical analyses of most issues in order to build arguments that would stand up in discussions and in even the most personal dilemmas. My notebooks were filled with talking points to make my case or compose a talk about the latest issue I was involved in. In the case of women's reproductive rights, I was well versed in what I believed were the most important facts.

Women average about thirty years of potential fertility. One

article I read in a progressive magazine reported that forty-six out of one hundred women (presumably American, presumably with insurance coverage...so many things to presume) would have at least one abortion in their lives. One (or two, even three) unintended pregnancies in thirty years seemed pretty low in that context.

I was buffered by facts, padded with statistics. I didn't yet know about the time one friend couldn't find a ride to the clinic and had to ask a friend's boyfriend, or the day another friend borrowed money from her mother for the procedure, or the moment when another friend looked at the ceiling in terror as the aspirator turned on, filling the room with its low-toned industrial noise. These were not facts or analysis. They were details that either I'd been unwilling to hear or my friends unwilling to share at the time it happened to them. These moments were particulars of an experience no one really asked about or shared. Pregnant, I now wanted their stories from beginning to end, if my friends were willing to share. I wanted to hear about actual experiences, not talking points, not rhetoric.

I opened my black address book. My hand scrawled red curlicues and circles on the edge of each page as I called every friend I knew who had had an abortion. I had to abandon my fact sheets and statistical notes, and surrender to the fact that I was now going to join the women on the other side of the fence.

In 1997, at the time of its publication, I read *The Story of Jane: The Legendary Underground Feminist Abortion Service*. I had become familiar with the terms used in the book over and over, like a spell: *curette*, *cannula*, *laminaria*. There was something romantic to me about the accoutrements of an underground service I considered nothing short of revolutionary. The tools in name were something sharp and utterly necessary, though I could only imagine particulars: the size of the instruments, the weight, the coolness of metal in an outstretched palm.

The following year, my days working at the clinic were composed of less-than-romantic paper cuts, constant questions about insurance coverage, and the completely unglamorous necessity of turning the building alarm off and on. Alone in the office, the fax machine's whir and beep often catching me by surprise, I understood the enormity of having to protect the physical property of the building and the people working inside. The all-too-common faxes from the National Abortion Federation spilled like foreboding ticker tape into our clinic, warning of recent attacks on abortion facilities all over the country on any given day.

"AB day," as we called the one day of the week when abortions were scheduled, started early in the morning when I turned off the alarm so I could enter, and ended only after the last patient had exited, the anti-choice protesters had abandoned the sidewalk outside, and the clinic defenders had left their posts. The ambient music might still be playing if I weren't the last to leave. I was glad to close the door on that music—usually top-forty songs sung by women whose voices all sounded the same, who warbled of love lost or love found. I often wondered about the soundtrack we provided in this space, how the women on AB days had to integrate the romantic, lilting music into their experience. Still, the music often drowned out the sounds of arguing, crying, or little screeches of pain and discomfort. Sometimes the volume was subtly turned up when someone's moaning became too loud. In that context, the music was essential.

On non-AB days, appointments ranged from pregnancy tests to annual pelvic exams and various other general-practice procedures. I tended to each of the patients those mornings and felt the days shift languidly into afternoons. The palm-sized dial I used to help calculate how many weeks pregnant someone might be was often in my pocket, to be used during phone calls from women inquiring about pregnancy tests. If I had time between patients, I sometimes studied this dial. Someone on the other end of a phone line had used this instrument, studied its small face of months and numbered

days, when I'd called to schedule an abortion. I would have given birth sometime in early October. I hid the dial in my pocket and was relieved again and again that had not been my fate.

I worked next to a pregnant woman four days a week at the clinic. She'd had more than one abortion herself and now assisted women during their own procedures. People constantly asked her, "Isn't it weird working there while you're pregnant? Don't you find it hard?"

Their questions reminded me of the phone conversation I had with a customer-service representative of my HMO when I called to inquire about coverage.

"Does my coverage include abortion?" I asked.

"Ahhh," he said. "Voluntary termination of pregnancy."

"Oh. Yeah."

"Let me see." His tone was friendly. He paused. I could practically hear him searching for something to say. "*Abortion*...such an ugly word," he finally said. And then, "Yes, voluntary termination of pregnancy is covered." I breathed a sigh of relief and thanked him.

I was so thankful that it wasn't until later that an outrage began to seep out of me, as though it had waited to be unearthed only when I could handle it. Why had this stranger felt the need to comment on the word *abortion*? Was it a chastisement? Or was he completely unconscious of what he said and how it might impact me on the other end of the line? There was no dialogue to be had. I had to accept his comment and move forward. With a red pen, I marked the day on the calendar when Michael and I would drive to Seattle for the abortion. I would soon tire of counting the days backward from that date, staring at the numbered squares that only reiterated the mistake I'd made in gauging my ovulation with a calendar.

It also wasn't until long after I hung up the phone that I realized there was a language to learn. It was not *curette* or *cannula*. It was the protective, sterile coating that *voluntary termination of pregnancy* provided, instead of the word people often found shameful, ugly, or rife with political meaning. It was the vocabulary of the doctor's office and insurance carrier, and I would actually find it useful later when explaining the procedure to countless patients.

When people asked my coworker if she found it difficult, or unsavory, to be working at the clinic while pregnant, she told them, "No. It's not weird or hard." In fact, she told me in private, she was easily irritated by people who couldn't utter the words *abortion* or *termination*. Eventually I felt exactly the same way.

The office felt heavy and turbulent with the comings and goings of patients in various emotional states. I found that the teenagers needed the most reassurance, as well as lengthy explanations of low-income funding for abortions. The yellow piece of paper I gave to each of them explaining how they wouldn't be responsible for payment if they fell into a particular income category did not seem to register. It was the slap of *This is happening* to me that I saw on their faces, as if they had just awakened into something sick and disturbing. Whether their faces were wan and soft or cold and grim, I could never predict whether they would return for the next appointment.

I remember one girl from Aberdeen, Kurt Cobain's hometown. I had been there a few times and had found it remarkable only in that it was so unremarkable. It felt as if a gray shroud had been thrown over the area, and I wondered if the air ever felt warm and fragrant or if spring somehow bypassed this place every year. As the girl from Aberdeen stood in front of me, her whole body seemed to cringe from the counter that separated us. She was not only willowy in her being; she was willowy in that she was wavering,

seriously wavering, about the decision she felt she must make. She'd had to travel way out of her county for an appointment to confirm what she had already guessed—that she was indeed pregnant—and to decide what to do about it. I wanted to project comfort and something solid, rocklike, when I offered the yellow paper, explaining how she could qualify for financial help to afford the procedure. She took the yellow paper. She never returned.

Before I even knew I was pregnant, strange things happened.

I broke open the seal on a pack of pastels that had been in a closet for over a year. As someone who never, ever draws, I surprised myself by covering pages of an empty sketchbook with colorful renderings of fire and multicolored, oversized, altogether preternatural flowers. I had countless dreams of holding babies that turned into cats and leapt out of my arms. My bones felt achy for an animal to join us in our house, a cat or a dog, something I could squeeze and murmur at. I longed for juicy hamburgers and strips of bacon after many years of living as a vegetarian.

Once we knew I was pregnant, Michael was present for me, listening to my ramblings, stoic and supportive as he could be. He had never been interested in biological children or parenting, and I knew this. It had never been a part of our plan, though our “plan” was rather nebulous and nonexistent, our schedules marked out only by meetings, demonstrations, rallies.

After making the appointment for a medical abortion, I still wanted to try alternate means. Equal measures of fear and DIY attitude compelled me to seek out books about herbal abortions. The local co-op and herb stores contained the ingredients I needed.

Michael and I stood over the stovetop daily, stirring herbs close to boiling. Sometimes I spoke to the herbs as they simmered, wishing for their highest potency to work their magic on me. I lay in hot,

mustard-oil-tinged baths and urged the embryo to detach, to release. I continued my runs around the nearby lake and pushed myself up the hills, running harder than I ever had before.

The herbs didn't work. I began to see the embryo as something much more powerful than I'd anticipated: hanging on, refusing to be washed away.

My abortion was scheduled almost four weeks from the day I'd found out I was pregnant. Each week I met with my therapist, and each week I realized that though I wasn't going to carry this pregnancy to term, I was developing a relationship with this fetus, with the knowledge that the relationship would soon end. I began to understand in some small way that there were transformations I wanted to undergo in the next five years, and that maybe, down the road, I might consider children—though probably not with Michael.

As the weeks went on and I described fearing any connection to the fetus inside of me because it might make the loss of it more intense, my therapist challenged me. "Perhaps the more time and thought you devote to the relationship you have with this fetus, the more healing you'll find available to you," she explained. "The more gifts." This notion seemed radical and scary and weirdly exciting to me. I had thought that it was best to consider a fetus a clot of cells, a scientific phenomenon—not part of a relationship. I even believed that this stance was a feminist one. No one had ever offered this other way of thinking about it. Now I was learning that there were more ways to consider this embryonic passenger and still fight the feminist, pro-choice fight. A new dimension of experience was opening up to me, and I slowly, gingerly, ventured in.

Alongside my work at the clinic, I was developing a hands-on education in the often-frustrating skill of interfacing with anti-choice groups. I never had to deal with them directly at the clinic. A consistent group of clinic defenders outfitted in fluorescent orange

vests patrolled our clinic on AB days, often outnumbering the anti-choice protesters, and it made my job much easier knowing they were there. The clinic defenders were a congenial assortment of male and female second-wave feminists, third-wave feminists, sexy hipsters, and earnest students from the college. Coffee and doughnuts were shared, and from the inside, it seemed like a convivial weekly social event. It wasn't until later that I learned of the gunshots fired near the clinic, the harassment of women coming to and from the clinic doors, and the vandalizing of the clinic owner's home.

Things were more overtly dangerous in the streets. One demonstration that spring was marked by confusion and chaos. It was sunny and dry, itself an oddity in our damp, mildewed existence. It was weeks and weeks after my own abortion, and I was one of many standing on a sidewalk the next town over. I'd left work at the clinic early that day, receiving advance notice that anti-choice organization Operation Rescue would be staging a demo against the second and newest abortion clinic in the area.

The street was shut down because of the commotion, and a police car was parked in the middle of the street, the officers observing the shouting matches between pro-choice and anti-choice protesters. The owner of the property whose sidewalk we stood on brandished a hose to scatter us away from his business. The Operation Rescue signs and their escorts were in full force on both sides of the street. We were assailed by Bible scripture, and some of the pro-choice supporters lobbed insults and shrieked their own vitriol.

I was feeling oddly subdued by the sunny afternoon. The chanting, shouting, watching, and waiting took on a rhythm that felt strangely tranquilizing. When I saw a sheriff's officer suddenly pull a gun out from his vehicle, the inexplicable dreaminess I'd been feeling slowed my senses further. I wondered aloud to Michael if we should drop to the ground, and I could hear a trembling in my voice when I said it. Something about the officer's action seemed to turn everyone's voice up a notch in pitch and volume. The Operation

Rescue people seemed not to worry about this scene, but the pro-choice contingent were awash in adrenaline. People scurried to and fro on the sidewalk and called out what they were seeing, what we were all witness to. All eyes were immediately drawn to this officer, who seemed not to even know what impact his firearm might make.

Finally, without explanation, he put the weapon away as simply as he had withdrawn it. The clinic defenders and Operation Rescue crowds eventually thinned, and the street reopened to traffic. Everything returned to some semblance of normal. Time suddenly sped up, and my senses, previously slowed, caught up to me in a rush.

The newspapers did not go into great detail the next day. The facts were that a lot of local people showed up to protect the new clinic, and a lot of people turned out to protest the clinic, largely out-of-towners whose mission was to travel with their message and ill will. Still, that afternoon, when the air felt thick and the protesters seemed to hit a crescendo at the sight of the officer and his gun, I was confronted, viscerally, with the heft of this thing we refer to so often as an “issue,” the way it could quickly grow into something emotionally taut, screaming.

In January of that year, 1998, protestors and demonstrators turned out in many cities across the country for the twenty-fifth anniversary of *Roe v. Wade*. Norma McCorvey, otherwise known as “Jane Roe,” was no longer a representative of abortion rights. She had, in fact, been baptized in a swimming pool three years before as part of her conversion to Christianity, and ended up working for Operation Rescue.

Days after the anniversary, a clinic bombing maimed Emily Lyons, a nurse at a clinic in Birmingham, Alabama. Later that same year, Dr. Barnett Slepian, an obstetrician who provided abortion services, would be murdered in his home, the soup he had been warming

going untouched once the bullets hit the window glass. More similar stories, too many, followed, right up to the present time, as I write this.

Home from work after a day at the clinic, I conjured up the voices of the doctors, nursing assistants, and office coordinator when I read these kinds of stories. There was a simple and important purpose embedded in their jobs, and they were a lead I could follow. When reading newspaper accounts of acts of violence against health-care workers and the buildings they worked in, I was silently grateful for each day everyone I worked with made it home safely. No job I'd had before—or since—carried with it this kind of weight.

In late February of 1998, before I had stepped foot in the clinic I would later work in, before I would come face to face with the most virulently outspoken anti-choice woman in the county, I had an abortion.

Ever faithful to the volunteer jobs I'd committed myself to, I worked my appointment into an ambitious and task-filled day. Michael and I drove from Olympia to Shelton early on a Friday morning to drop off the hard copy of the newspaper he'd painstakingly put together the night before. From Shelton, we drove to Seattle for my appointment, and after it was over, we stopped by a bookstore, visited a friend, and took a ferry to Bremerton. We drove from Bremerton to Shelton, picked up the bundles of finished newspapers, and made our usual drop-offs. Then we stopped to pick up video cameras and equipment at the local cable-access-station office, and later filmed a talk by writer and activist Tim Wise.

Most of my recovery that day happened in the passenger seat of the car, where I slept deeply as the ferry navigated the waters between Seattle and Bremerton, and Michael navigated us from Bremerton to Shelton to Olympia.

We spent little time at the Seattle clinic. Their schedule was efficient, and the procedure itself was quick. From the moment the aspirator turned on, I felt free. I was teary throughout the procedure, silently bidding farewell to this fetus not meant to be. The nurse and doctor present, both women, were kind and supportive, and I felt waves of appreciation for them. The nurse held my hand throughout and helped me dress afterward, my feet unsteady beneath me and my hands a little shaky from the experience and the mild sedative I'd been given. The softness of everything carried over into the recovery room, where Michael met me, where we shared yet another experience that marked our time together as unique, which I would never again share with anyone else.

Many afternoons throughout our relationship, Michael and I sat in the cool, dark editing suites of the local cable-access channel. We ordered videos from progressive organizations and used the suites to edit the programming into something we could fit into the hour-long time slots we'd been allotted.

In March of 1998, we showed the video *Jane: An Abortion Service* on cable, and organized viewings of the video at our local library. One viewing occurred on a sleepy Saturday morning. Michael and I hosted an audience of three. One was the president of the county chapter of the National Organization for Women. The other two were a notorious anti-choice activist in our county and her colleague. We watched the video together in silence. When it was ejected and the television was turned off, I immediately felt as though the air had been sucked out of the room.

"I just don't understand why women would kill innocent children," the anti-choice woman whined, slicing through the tension. "I mean, I just want to tell all these women, 'I'll take your baby.'"

The five of us attempted to have a discussion. We spoke of the millions of children worldwide who were in need of adoption. We

asserted that women should have a choice to do with their bodies what they wished. We listened to this bright-eyed, slightly off-putting woman reiterate her desire to see *Roe v. Wade* overturned and “abortion mills stopped.” Her colleague asked over and over, “How could women do this?” in an incredulous tone.

My heart beat furiously and my palms were damp. I had had an abortion in a clinic just weeks prior to this video showing. Paranoid thoughts filled my head, and I wondered if this woman somehow, in some creepy way, knew what I’d experienced. The fact that the library was so close to our apartment and we could be tracked walking home from the viewing so easily further unnerved me.

When I finally spoke, it was with an even tone. I observed myself taking part in this strange dialogue in which I silently loathed the motives of this woman who would come to a video showing in hopes of persuading us to join her crusade. In fact, I wondered at her mental stability. I noticed that my interactions with anti-choice people were becoming slightly more diplomatic, but I couldn’t help but wonder how far any one of them would go.

For months afterward, Michael and I would joke about the woman, and her glassy-eyed, high-pitched declaration: *I’ll take your baby!* It was enough to make us laugh. With a slight shiver.

By May of 1998, I’d been working at the clinic for two months. My job title was officially “receptionist,” providing front-office clerical support at a women’s health-care facility. As I would write later for the purposes of my résumé: *Scheduled appointments, conducted client check-in, and other duties as needed.*

While working there, new information came at me every day in the form of detailed medical charts, conversations between the doctor and nurse practitioner—sometimes overheard—and intake procedures that varied from patient to patient. I was taking in

overwhelming amounts of information, from the details of one patient's symptomatic STD to the objects one mentally ill patient regularly and methodically inserted into her vagina only to come to the clinic to have the objects just as methodically removed.

At home, I found myself thinking about the medical histories on the shelves behind the office desk and the physician's notes on the lined paper attached to each folder. The constant dryness of my hands reminded me of all the color-coded tabs I'd touched each day. Sometimes women left the clinic hysterical, abandoning their abortion appointment altogether. In my dreams, I opened patients' folders and was confounded by unwieldy stacks of forms I couldn't identify as I shoveled small, bright, foil-covered bits of chocolate into my mouth. My reality often reflected these dream images at the front desk in some slight way.

In June 1998, I applied for and was offered a job at the library of the college I graduated from.

Throughout that spring, I'd been writing notes about my experiences—being pregnant, having an abortion, and working at a clinic that provided abortions—in a blank book. The book was hardcover with a spiral binding. On the front and back covers were images of roses—layer upon layer of oranges, pinks, and reds—all of which appeared preternaturally bloomed, not unlike the strange pastel flowers I'd produced in my previously unused sketchbook during the early weeks of my pregnancy. Those roses, thick as they looked with life, with fragrance, with fecundity, made me think of the metaphors ascribed to pregnant women, and how, in my state of non-pregnancy, I was possibly considered the opposite of ripe, blooming. I had chosen a different state altogether. But it was the start of the “bloom”—the weeks I had been made to wait before the abortion was to occur—that I wanted to focus on in this notebook. And now, I was ending this notebook, closing up a chapter in my twenty-five-year-old existence.

I gave immediate notice to the clinic. It was not reluctantly. The hours had been more than I wanted. Abortion days felt like midweek rollercoasters, even as I wanted to believe they were a manageable and valuable part of my activist dream job. I sensed that sitting behind the desk at the clinic was possibly not even where I belonged. My interest lay in the streets, in protests and demonstrations. I left the clinic.

On the day I witnessed that aborted fetus in a tray, after finally removing the smock and the mask, I returned to the clinic desk and set aside the experience to think about later. Later, the last AB patient left the clinic, and soon after, I was set free to ride my bicycle home.

I thought about what I had seen in the tray that afternoon as I pedaled, knowing I'd want to discuss it with Michael, but not yet knowing the words or the emotions I might express. By day's end, I had seen one more fetus, estimated at fourteen weeks, a rare occurrence at our clinic. The fetus was larger than I had imagined it would be. The image was burned into my brain. Momentary doubt thudded around my chest as I pedaled up the light incline toward my apartment. Could the sight of such things, the up-closeness of it, change my mind? Was there really power in such moments as I'd experienced at a rather typical day at work? If so, what kind of power did they hold?

As I locked my bike to the post outside my front door, I remembered the Operation Rescue posters I'd seen at protests. It was obvious they were looking for a particular response, and what more provocative way to accomplish this than to have posters of two-inch aborted fetuses enlarged to the size of the six-foot-tall anti-choice protestor holding the sign?

And still, the size of the fetus or the poster didn't matter.

What I was left with was this: I had been thrilled to see something of this magnitude, a feeling similar to secret privilege. I was overwhelmed by having viewed something that was perhaps ordinary to a doctor but highly unusual to the average person. I recognized that this kind of moment would be considered sinful, an abomination to many. But maybe it was also sacred, whether one agreed with the right to abortion or not.

I headed up the stairs. I told Michael about what I had been witness to. He listened and we finally, simply, sat in silence around the fact that I'd seen what I'd seen.

In the telling, and in the days after telling, I realized that my beliefs were not fundamentally changed. In fact, I believed, more so than ever, that it takes immeasurable courage and compassion, strength and caring, to choose to have a child—and sometimes equal amounts of the same to choose not to have a child. The choice of either could be, for any particular woman, sacred. At my core, I still believed—and continue to believe—that every woman has a right to choose abortion. Working at the clinic, I felt honored to play what part I did in the struggle to ensure this choice for the women I'd come into contact with, however dangerous it might feel, however conflicted I might be, ever. And this, I discovered, was its own kind of sacred.



EXCERPT FROM 1984: A MEMOIR

ELIZABETH ELLEN

Saturday night a bunch of us gather in Nicole's room with cans of Diet Coke and bags of M&M's and Reese's Pieces. We sit on the beds and in the desk chairs and on the floor, shoving the colorful candies into our mouths, one at a time, then burning our throats with the syrupy carbonation. Simon Le Bon and John Taylor stare at us from the walls. I don't know the other two Duran Duran guys' names but they're here, too. Jodie says "Hungry Like the Wolf" is her favorite Duran Duran song. She says it's really about sex.

"You can hear the girl panting in the background," she says. "You can hear her moaning, too."

"It sounds like someone's chasing her, though," China says. "It doesn't sound like they're having sex. It sounds like she's running for her life. Like she's terrified."

"It's supposed to sound like animal sex," Jodie says. "They have to hunt her first, like wolves hunt their mates."

I look at Nicole, wait for her to tell us who's right, but she just sits there painting her nails a deep sparkly purple. "Who wants me to paint their nails next?" she says.

"I do," Shelly says.

My nails are bitten down almost as short as Chelsea's. In junior high, Val and Becky and I went to the mall and bought Lee Press-on Nails and the four days after were the only time I had long nails. In fifth grade we made fake nails out of Elmer's glue by filling the ridge in our plastic rulers with glue and pressing the squishy material onto our nails, but they fell off before the end of the school day, before

we could even get polish on them, and Mr. Tucker, our homeroom teacher, would say, “Ladies, please pick your glue nails up off the carpet before you leave.”

“Hey,” Jodie says. “Does anyone have a Ouija board? We can’t just sit here painting our nails all night.”

“I have one at home but I didn’t bring it with me,” Terri says.

“I bet Janice has one at her house,” China says. Janice is home for the weekend. It’s the first weekend we are allowed to go home since school started and Janice’s dad came and got her after our last class on Friday. He didn’t look like Robert Plant, like Janice, which was surprising. He looked like a normal middle-aged business man in a suit and tie and I tried to imagine what he and Janice would talk about on the drive home, what music they would listen to on the radio.

“My mom won’t let us have one in the house,” Laura says. “She says it’s black magic.”

“Mine, too,” Jen nods. “The occult.”

At slumber parties in Ohio we used Val’s older sister’s Ouija board and played *Light as a Feather, Stiff as a Board* and had séances with black candles we bought from the Kaleidoscope store at the mall that also sold pet rocks and lucky rabbit’s feet and sea monkeys.

“Oh my god,” Jodie says. “A Ouija board is just a board game. They sell it next to Monopoly and Scrabble at Kmart, for crying out loud.”

“But people use it to call up Satan,” Jen says. “And now that teens are killing animals and other kids in Satanic rituals ...”

“Who’s killing animals and kids?” Jodie says.

“I don’t know, teenagers who listen to hard rock and take drugs and go to cemeteries and talk to the devil,” Jen says. “I read about it in *Rolling Stone*. I think they had a show about it on *Donahue* or *60*

Minutes or something, too. Our church has meetings about it.”

“About *it*?” Jodie says.

“Devil worship!” Jen says.

I sit quietly, listening, wondering if the senior boy who rode my bus in ninth grade and played Judas Priest and drew a pentagram on his jeans with a pen was a Satanist. He had long stoner hair and looked like the guy in the video they showed us in health class who did angel dust and tried to fly out a window. Mostly I just thought he was cool because he played “You’ve Got Another Thing Comin’” and “Juke Box Hero” (by Foreigner) loud enough for the rest of us to hear on his boom box, and at the time those were the two hardest rock songs I’d ever heard.

“Do you guys really think Janice worships the devil, like she says?” Jodie asks.

“I don’t know,” China says. “She says she and her friends go to cemeteries to hang out on weekends. Maybe she’s at one now!”

“Yeah, they’re probably totally sacrificing a cat to Satan right now, too!” Terri says and for a second we all stare at her, wide-eyed, but then she starts laughing. “You retards, I’m just kidding. That’s just all stuff reports makeup to scare parents. I don’t know anyone who sacrifices animals or children or other teenagers.”

“But what about the teens in the article I read in *Rolling Stone*? They actually did kill someone, another boy in their group,” Jen says.

“I don’t know,” Terri says. “People murder all the time, though. That doesn’t mean it was because of devil worship.”

“Why would anyone worship the devil anyway,” Nicole says, looking up from Shelly’s nails for a second.

“Yeah, I don’t get it,” Shelly says.

“I don’t know, why would anyone worship Jesus or God?” Terri says, and we all look at her like we’re shocked she doesn’t know the

answer, like, is that a serious question?

“No offense, but you guys are all pretty square,” Terri says. And I wonder if it’s her Mötley Crüe and Led Zeppelin records that have brainwashed her to say things like this. Last year in Ohio all we listened to was Van Halen and Def Leppard and AC/DC and Rush, but here at the Academy no one but Terri and Janice listen to those bands. Instead we listen to jam music and New Wave and reggae and Madonna and Prince.

Thankfully, ‘Rio’ comes on next and everyone forgets about devil worshipping and satanic rituals for a minute and starts singing along to Duran Duran, instead. And then we’re back to arguing over who the cutest member of Duran Duran is (Nicole says John and Jodie says Simon and the rest of us say one or the other), except Terri who says she doesn’t like Duran Duran and says she has to go listen to “Stairway to Heaven” now, anyway. We all wait til five minutes after she’s left, in case she’s waiting outside the door, listening, to start talking about her. Jodie gets up and cracks open the door, peeks outside.

“Coast is clear,” she says, her Alabama accent thicker than ever.

“Do you think she and Janice are gonna put curses on us, now?” China says.

“They taught us about that at church, too,” Jen says.

“Curses aren’t real, you idiots,” Whitney says, barging in from her date with Chad. “What have you babies been talking about? Devil worship again? How lame.” Whitney is flush, her bangs sweaty, and she smells like cigarettes. “Anyway, you have to believe in God, to believe in the devil.”

The rest of us sit there, staring. The implication that Whitney Whiting might not believe in God is staggering. Jen looks like she’s in shock, like maybe she thinks Whitney is the devil. I don’t know what I believe. I don’t think I believe in the devil, but does that mean I don’t believe in God, either? Do you lose your belief in God when you lose your virginity, is that what happened to Whitney? I want to ask Whitney what it was like, losing her virginity, sex, penises, but

then Billy Idol comes on the radio and we're all singing, "Dancing with Myself," which Whitney tells us is about masturbation, just like Cyndi Lauper's "She Bop," and I wonder what Whitney thinks about "Hungry Like the Wolf," if she thinks it's about sex, too, like Jodie, or if it's just about wolves, like China says.

The best thing about the Academy is that you're almost never alone. Which is also the worst thing. Every Saturday night is like a slumber party, but sometimes I miss the nights I would dance and sing alone at my house back in Ohio. I miss my Broadway records, *The Sound of Music*, pretending I'm Liesl in the gazebo: "I am sixteen going on seventeen, ..." Alone, I could be anyone I wanted to be. I could be Barbra Streisand or Julie Andrews or Stevie Nicks. I could even be Michael Jackson, or John 'Cougar' Mellencamp. Here at the Academy, I'm constantly reminded I'm just Beth.

Sunday night, Janice is back, dressed in the same worn out corduroys, wearing the same Black Sabbath t-shirt, her hair looking rattier than ever, and I wonder why her business suit wearing father doesn't buy her new clothes, or why he doesn't make her wear them if he does. I wonder if her mother is dead or just runaway like Jen's and mine.

I'm sitting in the upstairs rec room with China and Jodie, mildly eyeing whatever sport Jodie is watching on TV, when Janice walks by a second time.

"Hey," she says, in her low, gruff voice that sometimes reminds me of the 'take a bite out of crime' cartoon dog on TV.

"Hey," we say.

And I wonder if she visited any graveyards over the weekend with her friends back home, if they took drugs and listened to Quiet Riot or Ratt, if they drank cheap cans of beers or wine cooler two liters or vodka. I wonder if she knows any cute burnout boys. Any that look like Matt Dillon in *Little Darlings* or *Tex*. I have read all of the S. E. Hinton books: *The Outsiders*, *That Was Then*, *This Is Now*, *Rumble Fish*, *Tex*. I would date any of the boys in those books, or anyone who resembles the actors who played the characters in

these movies. There are boys like that at my high school back home in Ohio I will have crushes on my senior year: P.J. Reynolds and Troy Basinger and Doug Leech. Boys who drink and smoke and listen to Pink Floyd and AC/DC. Dark-haired boys with long hair and jean jackets. Boys who won't go to college, who will never leave our hometown.

"I'm going to go smoke, anyone wanna smoke with me?" Janice says. And suddenly Terri appears. Suddenly Whitney is standing in the hall, a pack of cigarettes and pink Bic lighter in hand. Suddenly I have an overwhelming urge to go with them. Even though I don't smoke. And I wonder what would happen if I did, if I went and sat next to them in the smoking area without a cigarette. I won't smoke until I'm nineteen, the summer after my freshman year in college, the summer I work at Cedar Point, the largest amusement park in Ohio, maybe in the Midwest, the summer I sleep with a boy named Mick who looks like a skinnier Billy Idol and chain smokes and, rumor had it, has a child back in whatever small Michigan town he came from.

I won't smoke the fall of my senior year when I go to a high school bonfire and make out with Doug Leech on someone's kitchen floor before he passes out, cigarette in hand. Monday at school he won't remember me. Or he'll pretend not to. And I'll spend the rest of the school year trying to get him to notice me again. Trying to get him to sing the words to "Every Breath You Take," the song that was playing in the kitchen while we made out, into my ear again.

Maybe I would like Janice better if she were a boy. Maybe I would have a crush on her, try desperately to get her to make out with me, instead of fearing her. Instead of running the other way anytime I see her.

I never think about the boys back home worshipping the devil. Or holding satanic rituals. Even when they write "666" on their notebooks, even when they draw pentagrams on their jeans and listen to Judas Priest. I feel protective of them, like I will Judd Nelson in *The Breakfast Club* when I see it next year. Like they all have fathers who get drunk and put out cigarettes on their arms. For all I know, Janice's dad puts out cigarettes on Janice. Or worse.

Maybe S. E. Hinton should have written a book about a devil-

worshipping girl like Janice instead of all those greaser boys like Ponyboy and Soda Pop. Maybe deep down Janice is just as vulnerable, just as loveable, as all the stoners and burnouts I love back home. But here at the Academy I'm just scared of her. I stay out of her way. Try not to make eye contact. Try not to piss her off.

Here at the Academy it is me against Janice. And Terri says Janice carries a switchblade. And Terri says Janice isn't afraid to use it. Terri says it has 666 carved in the handle. Terri says every girl should have one.



ACCESSORIES

FOR MY SPINE

KRISTIN JANAE STEELE

I always loved taking baths. As a little girl, I would lose time, splashing and playing with bath toys, refilling the cooling water with hot over and over again until the tank ran out and Daddy would remind me of the water bill. Our bathtub was blue, circa mid-70s interior design, with built-in shelves formed in the shape of upside-down sea shells like the ones we collected on beach trips. I'd high dive my McDonalds and Burger King plastic figurines into the shallow water, creating dramatic scenes where someone always got hurt and someone always had to be the savior.

"Stand up straight," my sister commands as I get out of the tub.

"I am, Sissy," I said, emphasis on the "am." I dry off, trying to straighten my frail, pale body and wrap myself in a towel that's tattered at the edges.

I look at her long, but her eyes are focused at my center. She touches my left hip.

"It's flat," she says. She cocks her head to the side and looks confused, but is careful not to scare me. I tell her "Let me see," and walk around her to look in large mirror over the double sink, also blue sea shell basins. I gaze at my body, trying to make my hips curve evenly, proportionally, but she's right: my left hip is straight, and my right curves outward, my hip bone at least two inches higher than the other side.

"We should probably ask Mom," she said.

My sister calls Mother into the bathroom to examine me. *Hmmmmmmmm*. They prod me, twist me, turn me around.

Hmmmmmmmmmm. In the child-standard measurement of time, their *hmmmmmmmmmm*-ing lasted forever.

They look at each other, making silent conversation with their locked eyes. Mother breaks their talk, looks at me with her thin lips turned in, as if turning them in is the only way she can stop herself from saying what's on her mind. "Sweetheart, we'll go to the doctor. Don't worry, it's probably nothing. We'll get it checked out," she promises. But I don't trust her, and I don't know why. Mother had always said she thought she'd end up becoming a doctor. She'd received a scholarship to leave our small West Virginia town and go to another state, another place, to get her education. Instead, she stayed and made her life as an elementary school teacher, the wife of a preacher's son, and the mother of two daughters, seven years apart.

Mother had wanted to be a doctor. Sissy will want to be a mother. But nothing would come of their wanting. From then on, with every dramatic re-telling of my medical history, Sissy and Mother argued over who found my scoliosis first.

That was the summer before I turned nine years old. I was a girl who loved to play outside, loved to be in the garage with Daddy when I could, or when mother would let me and when he wasn't tending to his aging parents' needs. One of sixteen—six boys, ten girls—my dad knew how to live in a house with women. My presence was welcome in his garage, the place he'd escape when he and Mother got into it. They'd yell over complicated things I didn't yet understand or have patience for and I'd hide upstairs until I heard the slam of the front door, when I'd burn to go outside and watch him work in silence, as opposed to floating among the tension in our house. Despite my mother's frequent tears of frustration, she seemed to be the tough one, even alpha at times, a product of second-wave feminism; she would work, she would have children, she would have her own money, she would be prepared and prepare her girls to exist as women—and if we had to—without the help of a man. But I wasn't yet old enough to understand why this was important or understand how much I would value her or understand who she is—not only as my mother—but as a woman.

*

I was a girl who grew up fast. The summer they discovered my scoliosis, I'd grown six inches or so in a just over a year. But my rush to become a woman was not solely physical. At age four, I was already quick to find loopholes in the rules—for example, one time my grandmother told me to keep my dirty hands off her storm door, so I grasped them behind my back, leaned forward, licked the glass instead. By age seven, I had already had my heart broken—I was love with not one, but two boys, and both of them seemed to prefer dark-skinned brunettes to freckled red-heads like me. But it was that summer, at age nine, that my identity began to develop in form far beyond my rebellious nature and masochistic desire for unrequited love. It was then that words “disorder” and “deformity” became part of my vocabulary.

When I was first diagnosed with idiopathic scoliosis, I was most bothered by the word “disorder.” By definition, it calls to mind a mess, a space disorganized, everything out of place. By age sixteen, only two to three percent of Americans have scoliosis. It is overwhelmingly a “female” disorder, with young girls almost twice as likely to develop it than boys. Many people with scoliosis often suffer from a lack of motor-sensory awareness, and I am one of those people. Some doctors describe this as having a hole in the “mental map” of the body, leaving our brains unaware of certain parts of our bodies. At times, we don't know where parts of our bodies are in space. Although we understand much about the ramifications of scoliosis, the deformity still remains idiopathic—meaning, still, no one knows what causes it.

My spine has two curvatures and looks like the letter S. For me it came on quietly, no pain in the beginning, only an aesthetic imbalance, a lack of symmetry, visible to those who are really looking. When I was first diagnosed, I couldn't remember having had any back pain yet, and I didn't understand how my body could turn on me like that with no warning. But no one appeared to be as afraid as I felt inside. Because of that, I didn't want to appear scared. It was shock upon seeing my x-ray, seeing the curvatures, and knowing my insides were abnormal, disorderly, so much so that doctors and nurses and my mother comforted me. I don't remember understanding my fear, or feeling merited in feeling afraid, and I don't remember the moment when someone first implied or maybe

even said, "This back brace will save your life."

THIS BACK BRACE WILL SAVE YOUR LIFE.

But I knew it to be true. I knew the air of danger. But because of the back brace, I was to feel safe and spared. The back brace was a *blessing*, I was told. I should be thankful. I would strap myself in. I would stay strapped in for twenty-three hours of the day, strapped with three broad strips of Velcro attached to the back inflexible off-white plastic, with short and wide metal nuts and bolts. A plastic contraption with strategically placed holes, one large one for the side of my rib cage to pop through, several other small ones drilled in the front to let the my skin breathe. Holes, all cut into plastic lined with foam and thick pads that would help mold my body, hold my body, unable to bend from just below my would-be breasts to the middle of my would-be hips, forcibly growing in the right way, filling the mold of a woman-self in a woman-shape I was to embody.

After my first spinal exam and x-ray, Dr. Back Doctor, who had a complete lack of bedside manner, handed my mother a prescription, a slip of paper similar to those I'd get for any other minor ailment like a sinus infection or skin rash with a round of antibiotics as my simple cure, only this time it was for my Boston Jacket-style back brace. We drove to Hangar Prosthetics and Orthotics, and gave the prescription to my orthotist, but I don't remember his name or his face like I do Dr. Back Doctor. The orthotist took measurements and sent me home with another piece of paper that I was to keep. The paper had tips and directions and frequently asked questions and I kept that paper and read it.

I read it again. My mother read it. My father read it. Sissy read it.

When I came back for my next appointment, I was fitted with the brace. It reminded me of watching my older sister getting measured for high school dance dresses at our small town seamstress. Only instead of sparkling fabric, my torso was wrapped in creamy white plastic where my ribs would be eventually marked over with a permanent marker to indicate the location of the "window" where one set of ribs would pop out. They took the plastic off and went into another room. I remember the sound of a saw while they shaved

the plastic down, a sound I would hear several times well into my teen years. They came back into the room, wrapped it around my body again, and asked a series of questions:

Is that comfortable?

Well, no it isn't comfortable, I thought. What is this thing supposed to feel like when it's comfortable?

Does it pinch your skin? Does it push into your rib? Is it tolerable?

My mother: Does it feel right?

Yes, I said at some point. I don't remember if it was a lie.

I was handed another sheet of paper, this time information on how to best use one's back brace. Tips. Directions. Frequently asked questions. I had so many questions and that paper was supposed to answer all of them. It didn't.

*

He tells me I have child-bearing hips. Child-bearing hips. Hips that can withstand the stretching and separation of the pelvis, that necessary split to push and shove more life into our lives. In my adolescence, I haven't yet thought of having children. I haven't yet really considered that question women must ask and be asked and ask again: Do you want to have a child? I haven't yet really considered those questions women must ask and are asked and ask each other again. This was around the age of twelve, and I am standing braless in a tank top and pants-less in my cotton underwear facing my orthopedic surgeon and I haven't yet had my first period when he tells me I have child bearing hips.

By middle school, I'd had more X-rays than I could count. I had become accustomed to constant chapped skin and my left arm and my right thigh going numb. The back brace pinched and squeezed, pressing so firmly in some spots for so long that the pressure would turn to pain and the pain would turn to nothing. Sometimes I'd scratch or slap certain places on my skin, just to see if I could feel.

My breasts, just budding, were pushed up unnaturally high by that plastic but life-saving contraption. I didn't know much about nipples, but I knew that mine were out of place. My hips felt constricted, but their natural, new roundness just kept pushing to get rounder. As he strapped me into my back brace from behind, three firm tugs on the Velcro closures, Dr. Back Doctor would say, every time: You're going to have yourself some child-bearing hips. I had a feeling he intended that comment to be a compliment to me as a woman, but I wasn't one of those yet, and I just wanted my hips to be freed.

With every next appointment, every additional discussion regarding the curvature of my spine and whether or not it was closing in on vital organs or whether or not I should have metal rods placed in my back to stop it, there was a frenzy of unanswered questions. I was always afraid.

I tried to explain to kids at school why I couldn't bend down to pick up pencils and why I couldn't play on the jungle gym and why I stood unnaturally straight and stiff as a mannequin. Some understood and left me alone; others punched me in the stomach and laughed when I couldn't feel it. People who were my friends would knock on my back and ask if anyone was home. "Anyone in there?" they'd say and laugh. Nope, I eventually thought, *there isn't*.

They were only slightly different, the appointments, slightly worse, each time. I had been in Dr. Back Doctor's office every four to six months since my diagnosis, and by the time I was released from wearing back braces, by the time my hips were freed, I had worn five of the contraptions, each one a mold for my growing body, each one evidence of my physical transition from girl to woman, each one a new \$2,000 accessory for my spine. Every appointment seemed like a re-living—a re-living where, time and time again, strangers took pictures of my insides that I didn't want to see.

Pictures of my spine: my S.

Pictures of my hand: Joints not yet fused, but when they do, we know I've reached the end of my childhood growth.

Pictures of my pelvis: it widens into parentheses of woman's shape where it once looked like brackets, the squareness of just a girl. My

hips rushed to womanhood faster than my breasts, and my mind was already a woman's long before anyone could see it.

*

I recently found a picture of myself from middle school that I'd forgotten. In it, I'm walking with my then-best friend Jordan down the sidewalk in front of the school's main hallway. In the photo, I'm sporting a terrible rendition of "The Rachel" haircut. I have round, crooked wire-frame glasses resting on my freckles that have yet to disappear. But what I see most has nothing to do with the surface. The only thing I can see is how I remember looking under my clothes, in that back brace, as it held my body together, but began to break my mind. Tiny cracks like fractured bones, which I would never stop trying to repair with the wrong fillings. I remember the chapped skin under my arms from the rubbing, I remember the numbness in my hips from the pinching, I remember the point at which I could no longer remember not being in pain. I never let anyone but my sister and my mother and my doctor see that braced body without clothing.

Unlike the dozens of images of the insides of my body, there is no visual record of my body wearing any of the braces. There is no visual record other than what only I can recognize as thinly veiled discomfort in my photographs, like this one. I regret having not one photo of that body, of that girl, so that I could accept her now because I couldn't then. I wish I could speak to her, let her stand bare in front of me, and tell her that women don't have to smile for anyone unless they want, and her hips never have to bear children, even if they can.

*

I casually told my mother a few years ago, while in my late twenties, that I do not want any children. It hadn't been long since she had gone with me to my former orthopedic surgeon's office, but this time someone else besides Dr. Back Doctor, for a check-up. It had been ten years since I'd last stepped into that building, at 16, when they freed these hips of mine, revealed my woman-shape that I'd struggle to appreciate as-is. I usually prefer to be alone for doctor appointments, but this time my mother joined me, officially, to help

fill in the empty spaces of my memory—and unofficially because, after all these years, I was still scared.

I knew the drill—after confirming there was no chance I could be pregnant, I undressed and moved my arms in various poses, holding my breath for multiple x-rays. As I stood there, listening to the snap and hiss of the machine, I realized that no one would tell me I was going to have some child-bearing hips; I have them. They are now mine.

Back in the exam room, where my mother was waiting, she asked me how it went when I returned in my hospital gown. “Fine, same as always,” I said, even though it wasn’t. Dr. Different Back Doctor knocked. “Come in,” we both said simultaneously, me looking at my mother wondering why she answered for me, and my mother looking at me, knowing what I was thinking. Dr. Different Back Doctor made unmemorable small talk, and then he gave us the good news: no curve progression in a decade.

Lucky, I thought.

“What a blessing,” my mother said.

He asked me to lie on the exam table, face down. He felt around on my back and warned that, as I age, curvature progression is a risk, and it’s important that I do what I can to prevent that and protect my muscles, skeleton, and vital organs. He explained what I expected—physical therapy, exercise, don’t gain any more weight in my midsection because that will worsen my chronic pain.

As I sat back down, my mother asked him a question that went something like this: So, Dr. Different Back Doctor, when she was younger there was some question whether or not she’d be able to carry a child safely. What do you think?

“I don’t see any reason why she can’t,” he said. “Might be in bed for much of the end of the pregnancy, but bearing children shouldn’t be a problem.”

They both looked at me, seemingly waiting for a sigh of relief that I never offered.

I don't know if I was hoping to find out that I couldn't have a child—that, even if I wanted to, I could not use these child-bearing hips of mine for what some people say is their most important purpose. *How selfish*, I sometimes think, knowing so many women want to give birth and can't. But the truth is, I know I can't endure motherhood simply because I don't want to be a mother—maybe because of the cracks in my mind I'm still trying to heal or maybe because I can't bring myself to trust my body to protect me, let alone a child. But just like my mother so badly wanted for me, I work, I have my own money, and I exist without the help of a man. I exist in this strange body of mine that's served me well enough. I walk, I move forward, I take a deep breath and listen to old sway of my hips carrying me — *I will, I will, I will.*



BECAUSE THE AIR IS LAVENDER AND WINE

NICOLE STOCKBURGER

I know I'm not the first woman to love
on this land: buckshot of creek, slipstone orchard
in shade and clay. Not the first

to love the way sparrows tumble in each other's
downy feathers or the taste of green garlic, crab apples.
How plants so willingly give fruit.

A red-faced fox showed himself this evening and I was alone
with the thought of what I might possess over creatures
who claw lines on the backs of birds. I know

I'm still nothing here, not the first to lay my naked chest
against yours, to trace your cottonwood skin. The way
you form clouds with your mouth when you speak

and everything you touch turns to silt and sugar
peas. When you touch me I'm fields of rye,
tensed before rain. The last time I saw you

in the shower, you let me mouth the salt drips
on your lower back and I saw a distant woman ringing
a hen's neck, pricking her finger

on wild blackberry. All the women who loved on this side
of the creek have seen bottomland waters wash the bank away.
Tender as a branch gracing the forehead, they watch

me in the shoulder of these woods. When you sleep curving
to me like a scythe, one's in the kitchen licking jelly from her apron.
Another, young, couches in the V of a mimosa,

wrapped arms' length in rain and sweat. Woodsmoke,
lavender, wine: smells of you present as the air in summer.
I've tried to bottle them in jars. Another

woman, once in the loamy eye of a storm with wind kicking
up her dress, made a marking on the hill in sand. The before-women
and their shadows: bobwhite quails diving over me.

Let loose, they scatter like seeds: tulsi, tobacco, ginger, larkspur,
anything with a feel too dangerous to place a mouth around.
Then break, like wildfire, through the surface of soil.



Trump Reminds Me of My Rape

- IFER MOORE -

Illustrations by K.V. Naton

Dissociate:

to end your relationship with or connection to someone
or something: to separate (yourself) from someone or
something.

TRANSITIVE VERB : to separate from association or
union with another <attempts to dissociate herself from
her past>

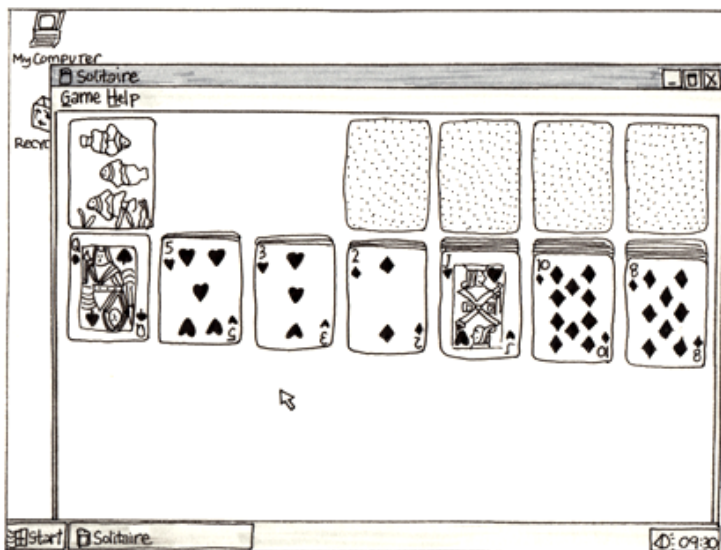
Here I've collected moments that haunt me along with
the images that calmed me.

1. Age 10

At a sleepover in Downey, CA.

A group of girls are telling scary stories. We're in sleeping bags in a living room that I've never been in before. I go to school with these girls. We are in fifth grade. We tell stories from things we've seen on TV; everyone has heard them all before. Until one girl tells us that her story is different. It's too scary to tell us. Too scary because it isn't pretend. We beg her to tell us. She begins with a man who is renting a room at her house. He is nice in the beginning, nice enough to take her with him in his car one day. He offers to pick up some candy on the way home from running errands. But they don't run any errands. She doesn't recognize where they are going. He tells her to get in the back seat and takes off his pants. He tells her to kiss him and then pulls down his underwear. She sees his penis and he puts it in her mouth. This chokes her. She can't breathe and he won't stop. She cries and wants to die. When it's over he gets dressed and gets back in the front seat and takes her home. He tells her she can't tell anyone what happened. She ends her scary story with: I didn't get any candy.

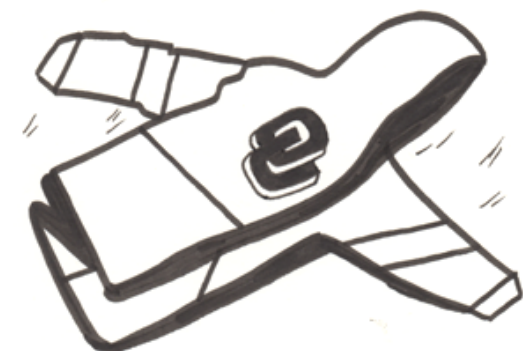
The only other thing I remember about this is that in the corner of the room there is a big desktop computer and on the screen is a solitaire game. When we are supposed to be asleep I stare at that screen and try not to think about what happened to that girl.



2. Age 11

At a sleepover in Midwest City, OK.

I'm the new kid at school and happy to be included. I am in sixth grade now. These girls want to practice kissing and making out. They have contests and choose winners. When we get bored of that we leave the house. We walk down to where the street ends and there are woods on three sides of us. The girls begin a new contest. Now we are supposed to strip. I've seen something like this on TV. I don't volunteer



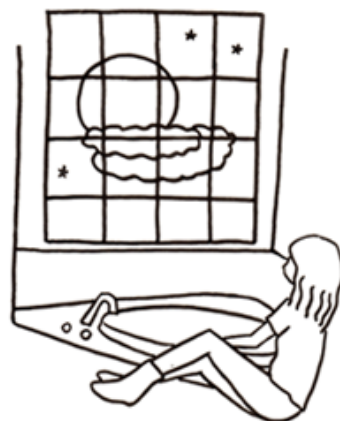
to go because I'm scared. I haven't been naked in front of anyone else before. These girls are good at acting sexy. I'm one of the last to go. It is short and awkward. I don't know how to act sexy. I am 11 and I am cold. We hear a branch breaking in the woods. We scream and then huddle, whispering, what if someone saw us? What if we get in trouble? We shouldn't have taken our clothes off. We hear a man say, "Yeah, little girls, take your clothes off." We run back towards the house screaming. A man comes out of the woods walking toward us. He is laughing. The girl whose house it is stops running. She knows this man. He is her mom's boyfriend. He says he's going to tell on us.

I stare at a jacket lying in the road. One of the girls is crying because she's going to get in trouble for getting it dirty.

3. Age 14

At our home in Oklahoma City, OK.

I come home from school and hear Madre yelling at my older brother, "Fine, go back there and live with those child molesters!" This is how I find out he is moving back to California.



After dinner and before bed my mom tells me that she will wax my legs for me. She doesn't allow me to shave yet. Waxing really hurts, but I like it because it is the only time we talk to each other. I ask her why she called grandma and grandpa child molesters. She tells me that her dad is a pedophile and that her mom denies it. She describes how her youngest sister was sexually abused for her entire childhood. Madre says he never touched her but described the ways he mistreated both of her sisters. She keeps dipping the wooden stick in the hot wax and covering my leg with it. She tells me there were signs that everyone ignored. The way she always had UTIs and was always hiding in the closets. Hiding from him. With strips of cloth, she presses down on my shins, my knees, my calves. She rips them off, taking away all the tiny hairs. My skin is smooth and red. She keeps talking about how he was a pervert and that her mom was just as bad for pretending it didn't happen. She doesn't say anything about dropping us off at their house every day when we lived there. They were our babysitters. We spent so much time at that house, with those child molesters.

I stare out the window and see the moon while Madre keeps waxing.



4. Age 17

Redondo Beach, CA

I wake up in a room I don't recognize. A man is having sex with me. He is a friend of a friend. I know his name and that he works as a butcher at a grocery store. I don't remember last night. I do remember that I have an English final and it's starting soon. My rapist tells me that he drove my car here and that it's parked outside his house. His house is just a few blocks

from my home. My rapist left my lights on all night so my car does not start. I make my rapist drive me to school. I am late to class and sit to take the final. In the desk behind me is a girl I remember seeing the night before and I ask her what happened but we cannot talk because we are taking a final. She helps me jumpstart my car after school and I go home. The first time I undress I am in my own bathroom. I don't know where my underwear is and it hurts to pee. In the mirror I am shocked to see my body: red, rubbed raw, disfigured. It does not look like my body anymore. I stare at my deodorant on the counter for a very long time.

My friend tells me that she does not remember much either. There were two other guys there, one that we went to school with. He cries when I ask him about it. He tells me that he's sorry. It is his friend who is my rapist. The other guy says that he has a video and photos of it. At first he says it will help me prove that I was raped, but later he tells me it's proof that I wanted it to happen. I do not tell my parents what happened. I can't sleep alone for months.

5. Age 20

Ensenada, Mexico

My brother and I are drinking beers. I know exactly what I want to talk to him about. It is the first chance I have where it's just him and me talking without other people around. I ask him if he knows about grandpa. He says he does. He says it's fucked up. Then, he blames it on drugs. Says that grandpa was just doing meth back then and that's why the sexual abuse happened. My brother still lives at that house where it happened, with the man who did it and the mother who denies it.



I stare at our empty beer bottles.



6. Age 22

Redondo Beach, CA

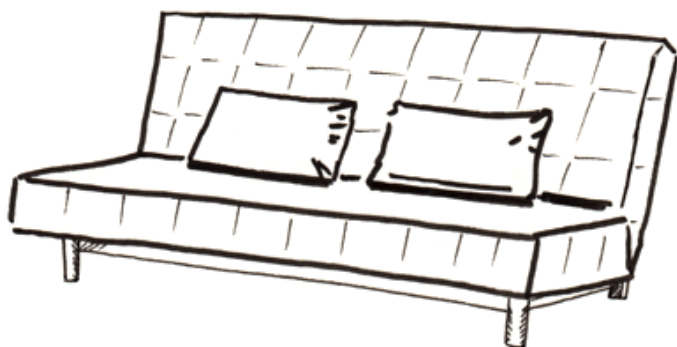
I move back home after college and it starts with me remembering how I couldn't sleep alone in that bed after I was raped. By this time Madre knows about my rape and she tries to buy me things to make me feel better. The house where I woke up to my rapist raping me is so close that every time she drives me to Target she passes it and I have to see it. We fight a lot and don't know how to talk to each other anymore.

I get jury duty and the judge asks everyone if they have been the victims of any crime. I ask to answer in private and tell him I was raped. The judge is sensitive and apologizes for that having happened to me.

I go to a Planned Parenthood for a pap smear. I check the box that says that I've experienced sexual assault. I tell the nurse about my rape and I talk about my grandpa. She gives me phone numbers for places I can go to for free therapy. She says by law she has to report the rape. I cry and say okay, but when I am in the office they say I have to wait for the police to come to take the report and I say I have to go to work even though I don't. The police call and call but I ignore it. I think about that form and whether or not I should have checked that box for months before I finally go to therapy.

7. Age 24
Hollywood, CA

I am dating. I meet a guy. We go out a few times. He invites me over for dinner. He has a small studio apartment. We kiss. I tell him that I am not ready to have sex. I tell him that I am not on the pill so whenever I am ready to have sex we have to use a condom. We are touching and then he is on top of me and inside me, without a condom, and I feel defeated. I stare at the same futon from Ikea that is in my own apartment and wait for it to be over. Afterward, he gets up, sits on the edge of the bed and says, "Why does it feel like I did something wrong?"



8. Age 25
Burbank, CA

On Christmas Eve, Madre tells me that her dad has molested my cousin. I shake and cry and wish that he were dead. I tell her that my uncles should kill him. This stuns her. I ask if she called the police this time. No, her entire family knows but doesn't do anything.

I am working as a nanny and feel so much guilt about him being able to victimize the girls of our family and I worry, what if it's beyond our family? I don't want this child I take care of to ever have to experience these things. I drop her off at kindergarten

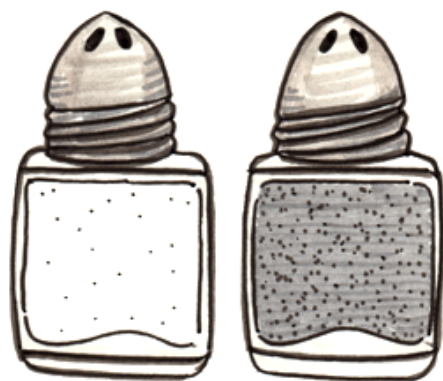
and am supposed to do housework while she is at school. I close myself off in that laundry room and I make the call. I use Google Maps to help me find their exact address. (It has been many years since I was at that house.) The person on the phone is kind and patient. I am crying when I hear myself saying these horrible violations occurred more than once, to different girls, spanning decades. The person listens and tells me that this is common, that families often try to cover it up. I stare at the collection of eco-friendly laundry detergent on the shelf in front of me.

My brother calls me a few days later to tell me that the police came by the house. He tells me that he played dumb, pretended he didn't know who they were talking about. I am upset. I tell him I was raped and he says, "Why didn't you tell me about it when it happened?" He says that what grandpa did was wrong, but he is not a parent, he does not have kids, it does not affect him. He still lives at the house for a few more years. My grandpa does not go to jail.

9. Age 29

Newport Beach, CA

We are at a timeshare. My parents have moved away again and are just visiting. I bring up a celebrity who has been accused of rape. An aunt and uncle are there too, they defend this rapist. My aunt says, Did you see her, meaning the accuser isn't pretty enough to be raped by this celebrity. I'm not sure if my uncle ever told her about what his dad did to his sister and his niece. Behind me their young daughter plays with my youngest sister. They can hear everything we are saying. My dad laughs and says something else to discredit the rape victim. My dad doesn't even like this celebrity, so I tell myself he is just trying to fit in with his wife's brother. Madre looks at my 'I'm-about-to-cry face' and says nothing. I stare at the salt and pepper shakers in the middle of the table.



We all stop speaking for almost a year after this night.

10. Age 30

Los Angeles, CA and everywhere else.

Donald Trump runs for President.

A video comes out where he is heard saying:

"Just kiss. I don't even wait. And when you're a star, they let you do it. You can do anything. --- Grab 'em by the pussy. You can do anything."

Then, another clip that comes out where he points to a little girl and says:

"I'll be dating her in 10 years. Can you believe it?"

Right after that another news piece surfaces that he once told two 14-year-old girls at a youth choir performance:

"Wow! Just think—in a couple of years I'll be dating you."

Women come forward with their own stories of times Trump violated them. Rape cases from years ago. Then I see a video where he tells his fans, his supporters, his potential voters, to look at her and tell him what they think. He makes a smug face and says, I don't think so. They cheer.

The videos and news reports of him bragging about sexually assaulting women isn't enough to convince people that he should not be our leader. All I keep thinking about is that he has talked about

is that he has talked about doing exactly what my grandfather has done to the girls in my family. I can not forget it. Instead, all of these memories of my own sexual assault cross my mind, multiple times a day. I feel bogged down by all the cases of rape and sexual assault and violations against girls and women that I've known.

I see a therapist and a psychiatrist. I am prescribed anti-depressants and anti-anxiety pills. I take an anti-anxiety pill when I talk to Madre for the first time in several months. We talk about the hard things. We promise to make an effort and be honest with one another. I don't push when she says she doesn't want to talk about certain things about herself. When I bring up my rape she gets uncomfortable and ends up saying things that upset me. Like how that's why she shouldn't have let me go out and do things because look what happened. She doesn't connect it to her own family history of trauma the way I do. She doesn't admit that I was also at that house where her father molested her sister and, later, my cousin. I have to prove it to her with my own memories. I remember the way he'd wrap up a slice of bologna in a tortilla for lunch. And that he has grandma's name tattooed on his forearm in splotchy green ink. He pulled his socks up as high as they could go and shuffled around in house shoes. But most of the time he just sat on the couch. And when I sat there next to him to watch Sesame Street, my frilly cuffed socks dangled off the edge because I wasn't big enough to reach the floor like he was. Madre still claims that, at least I was never left alone with him though. She holds on to that while she stays angry at my aunt for allowing the abuse to happen to her daughter. I try to empathize, explain that my aunt was the victim of it too, that she's doing the best that she can with what she's been through, too.

It takes me awhile to realize that I need to frame that perspective around Madre as well. She grew up in that house too. She escaped that house by first marrying a drug dealer who hit her, so to escape him she returned home again with my brother growing inside her. Five years later she'd run away again this time with my brother by her side and me growing inside her womb. I think she is strong and brave for finding her own way, far away from all of them. And I love her for it, even if I can't talk to her about it.

Still, our family is split, not sharing phone numbers or addresses ever since I made the call to the police. This is the mess that's left after child abuse was shoved away in a closet.

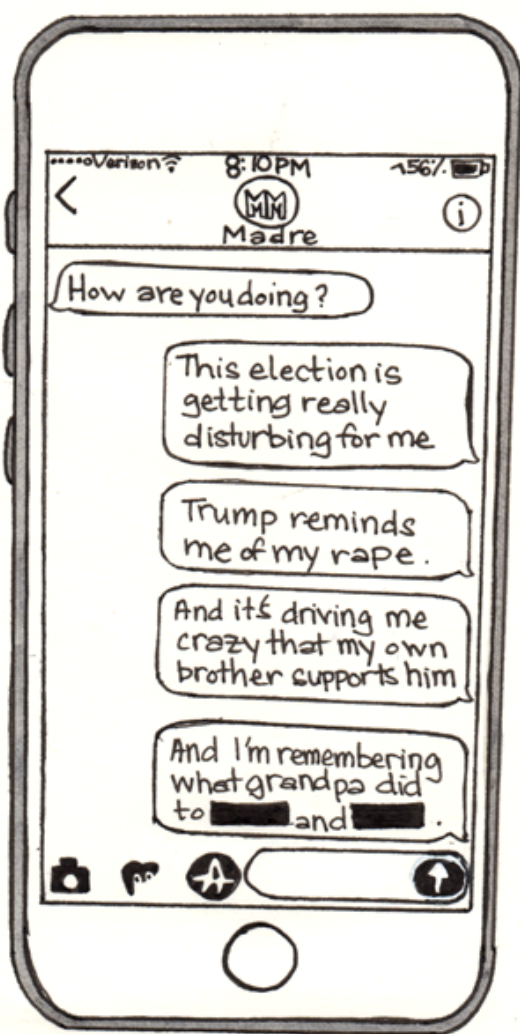
My brother tells me that he supports Trump. I get argumentative and try to change his mind. He only tells me that he hasn't done any research but still feels strongly that Trump will win and he'd like that to happen. Then he tells me that he's finished talking about it. He changes the subject. We still don't talk anymore.

Months after that call, Madre texts me, asking how I am doing. I tell her that Trump reminds me of my rape. She doesn't respond. We are again in a phase of not knowing how to talk to each other.

I begin writing this right after the election results. I stare at the first draft for two months before revisiting what I wrote. Instead of writing, I clean everything and make messes. I get my tarot cards read by my favorite Bruja. I buy groceries and cook all kinds of soups. I buy vintage sweaters and then ruin them by trying to hand wash them. I sew costumes and plush toys for my nanny kids. I

hike and do yoga. Eventually, I go to a group meditation where I manipulate my breath causing a state of calmness to run through me, but even in that quiet, safe room, I heard something haunting. It is the voice of my grandma yelling at me, calling me Metiche and Mentirosa. The same grandma who is married to the man who molested her daughter and granddaughter. She is yelling at me telling me that it's none of my business, calling me a liar.

But that's the night I come home and stare at these things that I've written and decide it's time to finish what I've started. The time for being silent is over.

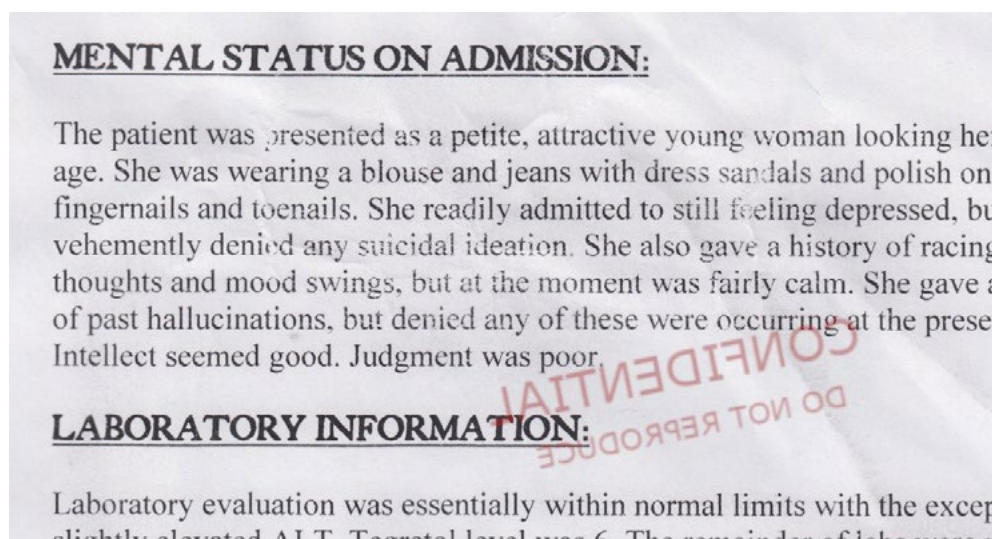


NOTES FROM ALTURA

MENTAL HOSPITAL

JULIET ESCORIA

THE DOCTOR



The psychiatrist I was assigned seemed like a creep when I met him. His desk was filthy, covered in files and papers and pens from pharmaceutical companies, five empty coffee cups. When I sat down, he leaned back and put his feet up on the desk, folded his arms behind his head. He kicked over an empty paper coffee cup, but didn't seem to notice. Then he asked me what was "shaking." I think he was attempting to "bro down" with me. It didn't work. He just looked like an idiot, an old fat guy wearing an ugly tie with a fucking guitar on it.

I answered his questions as briefly as I could while still being polite. The questions seemed insane. Like it seemed insane to not be able to pass his test. It seemed insane to answer "Do you feel suicidal?" with a yes. It seemed insane to answer his questions about drugs with the truth. It seemed insane to be asked "Are you experiencing

any hallucinations?” If I was hallucinating, wouldn’t I not know I was hallucinating?

I didn’t feel suicidal when I was sitting there in that chair, but I didn’t not feel suicidal either. Truthfully, I still wished I were dead, but I was now too lazy to do anything about it. Turns out killing yourself is hard.

And I suppose technically I wasn’t hallucinating because I didn’t see any skulls or hear any ringing phones. But the hallways in that hospital were hideous, covered in these thick gray spider web things. I kept my mouth shut about that.

WARDROBE

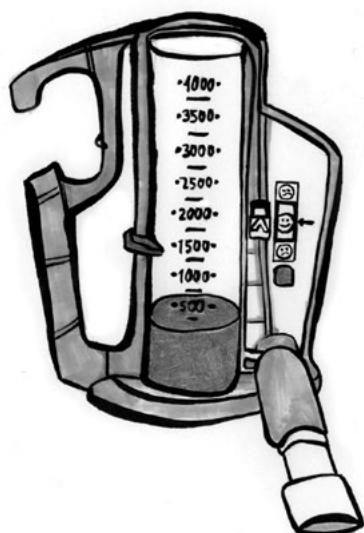
My clothes were all wrong. They took away my sandals because they said we had to wear closed-toe shoes. My mom had packed boots for me, but they wouldn’t let me wear those either because of the heels. She’d also packed my Converse, but shoelaces weren’t allowed because you might hang yourself with them. The shoes slipped off my feet without and they told me that was dangerous. I had to wear creepy hospital socks until my mom could bring me some cheap slip-on sneakers she bought at the drug store the next day during visiting hours. I didn’t understand how the socks were any more protective than my sandals but when I pointed that out, the lady just rolled her eyes.

My pants were bad too – they were too big without a belt because I’d lost weight in the hospital, and they didn’t allow belts, so I had to pull them up all the time. My sweatshirt had a drawstring around the hood, which they cut out. They took away my books and journal without even telling me why.

The belt made enough sense, but the shoelaces and drawstring seemed absurd. They weren’t long enough to hang from, and they’d

probably break with the weight of a body. All around me were things that would make better nooses. The curtains, the sheets, the towels.

PNEUMONIC DEVICE



In the hospital, I was given this plastic device that I was supposed to use twice a day for a month to increase the strength of my lungs. It had a tube, and I was supposed to put my mouth over it and blow just right until a yellow ball rose up to the smiley face. So basically it was the same as sucking a dick.

HORMONES

“Everyone in here just wants to fuck.”

That was the first thing another patient said to me. I was waiting at

a table in the recreation room while they decided where to put me. I don't know why he was in there. Everyone else was in group.

He wanted me to be sick like him. Fucking seemed like something you would do only if you gave up on getting well, if you didn't care how many days they tacked on for acting crazy, if you were trying to replicate life in here like life on the outside.

He sat next to me in every group for the rest of the day, sometimes touching his foot to mine, staring at me until I noticed. He wasn't unattractive. His eyes were bright blue, and his teeth were all crooked but in a way that seemed cute. I didn't know why he was in there, he hadn't attempted suicide, which meant it was probably something worse. I didn't need anyone's crazy dick inside of me.

By free time that night, he'd given up. He was sitting next to this girl on the couch with stringy hair and sunken-in cheeks. I watched him put his hand under her shirt. She just sat there, no trace of emotion, no movement of accommodation or refusal, as though nothing was happening to her at all.

ROOMIES

My roommate's name was Sam. She said she'd been in here three times, the last time for a whole month, and if I had any questions I could just ask her. I didn't know you could get stuck in here for a whole month. I wondered what you would have to do to be locked up that long. I asked her how long she was staying this time and she said she didn't know. Maybe a week. She said she had new insurance and that's when it ran out.

Her face was pretty, with these big brown cow eyes, but a pretty cow, soft and sad. Unfortunate legs though – tree trunk thighs pocked with cellulite. I saw this when we were changing into our pajamas. It was weird to get almost naked in front of someone you

knew nothing about. She had big bandages on her arms, which I hadn't seen before because she was wearing a sweater. Now she was wearing a sports bra and white Hanes underwear.

"Oh," I said. "Did you try and kill yourself too?" I wasn't sure if this was appropriate to ask. I didn't know the etiquette of talking to someone you barely knew while standing together in your underwear in a mental hospital.

"No," she said, like it was a normal question. She looked at the bandages, like they weren't a part of her. "But no one believes me. I cut so deep I almost bled out. It was an accident. If I was trying to kill myself, I would have cut on the bottom, not the top. I'm not an idiot."

I stepped closer to look, even though there was nothing to see because the bandages wrapped all around her arms. I could see the scars on her thighs, though, white and scaly and thick as ropes. Next to her scars, the ones on my own thighs seemed so tiny and normal.

"What did you do that with?" I asked her.

"A knife," she said.

"What kind of knife? Like a pocket knife? I did that once."

"No, a kitchen knife. One of those big ones." She didn't say it like she was bragging. She was saying it because it was true.

When I got in bed, which was more a cot than a bed, I couldn't stop thinking about her scars. I couldn't stop thinking about her, taking a big kitchen knife and carving into herself like she was nothing more than food. I thought about doing it myself and I couldn't. I couldn't turn myself into food. I couldn't stop being a body.



9/11

D. Ladford

TWO POEMS

EMILY PAIGE WILSON

MY DOCTOR TOLD ME THERE WAS NOTHING THERE

She poured herself curiously over my ovaries
for hours with ultrasounds and incisions

and told me there was nothing there—no signs
of continental shift, no nerve damage or tissue

drifting to explain my sudden onset of pain.
The man I was sleeping with told me to

get over it; he seemed to just want the crying
to stop. We were, after all, not serious enough

to be patient with each other's pain.
They didn't know how practiced I'd become

in distraction—deeming every discomfort
unworthy of concern. How I had to ignore

for a year the fear of sex—it left me
golden and swollen as a lunatic. I couldn't walk

without flinching if my thighs licked. The infection's
fever flossed its glossy fingers through my bones.

How I made a witch hunt of each mirror—
There's nothing there. There's nothing there.

Months later, a new doctor would have to hold me
down as she checked the wreckage of the cysts

on my Bartholin gland—hidden bandits
that had ballooned. She shot a disinfectant

into the wound, my nerves a network of burn.
Firework rot electric and hot. She

apologized as she sliced then milked blood
and pus from the thin skin of my labia,

gentle yet firm as if she had mouths to feed.

AN UNDERGROUND NURSE SPEAKS 100 YEARS AFTER THE LAST ABORTION CLINIC CLOSES

Nothing here is sterile but our hope.
Sterling bedposts clamped to floors of lead.
Every woman waiting, already a ghost.

We've served boiled pennyroyal, its purple smoke,
ever since the pockmarked politicians signed their papers and fled.
Nothing here is sterile but our hope.

First fall the tissue and mucus tethered together thick as rope.
Gauze and the wet garnets embedded in flesh.
Every woman waiting, already a ghost.

Screams then silence. The sound of choking.
Sometimes only the softest of cries if death is generous.
Nothing sterile here but our hope.

I carry with me the golden words of an older nurse:
Once we were seen as more than hosts.
Every waiting woman already a ghost.

Wearing linen masks with sprigs of stitched rosemary,
we dress our dead in such warm shades of red.
Every woman waiting, already a ghost.
Nothing sterile here but our hope.





CAVE

MESHA MAREN

The first time Jodi shows Paula the cave, Paula says Jodi must be pulling her leg, telling her they can push through that split rock into a room big enough to stand up in. Jodi goes on ahead, burrowing in between the muddy limestone. The cold air laps up against her, a heavy black, darker than the dark behind her, an air full and wet with shifting invisible proportions. She can feel the space in that circle-room adjusting to her, the hole her body makes in that mineral thickness, and it feels safe. The rest of the world out there is far away.

“Jodi?” Paula calls, her voice small.

Jodi stretches her fingers in front of her face, feeling without seeing, eyes frantic at first but soon settling. “Come on,” she hollers.

Paula is hesitant but stubborn too, and though Jodi has known her only for four days, she can already see how she hates to be left behind. When she tumbles, finally, into the cavern, she sucks up half the air and Jodi feels everything flip. The room loud now with the jumble of both bodies.

“I’ve got a lighter here somewhere,” Paula says, but Jodi silences her.

“Shshsh, no. You’ll ruin it. You turn on a light and our eyes’ll never adjust.”

Adjust, just, just, ust, us, the rocks whisper.

Jodi can see without seeing that all Paula's cocksureness is gone. She is scared and it tastes to Jodi like an ice-cold sweetness. She drinks it in, keeps it there on the back of her tongue.

"This way," she says, inching forward toward the arch into the next room.

Their eyes do adjust and they quit falling, eventually, over every bump and start seeing the outlines of the stalagmites under their feet, the long white drips of icicle rocks, and green lichen glowing on fallen slabs of stone. They leave the second chamber and bend again, bowing to their knees as they make their way into the throne room.

The cake sits in the very center, as tall as Jodi's waist and perfectly white. Paula's breath sucks in. Stepping up, Jodi pulls her close, the warmth of their bare skin tingling against all that wet air. And just above them, in the arched dome of limestone, a small hole lets in two pin beams of light, bright at the surface but bluer below as they fall and spill across that slick mineral.

When they emerge everything is fuzzed up with the soft mauve of evening and lightning bugs just beginning to glint along the edges of the trees. Jodi can feel Paula beside her, taking it all in, and she wonders if the heart of this place is visible to her, if anyone else can ever love it like Jodi does.

Out of the dense grass, a few feet in front of them, a whorl of dark motion streams up, flapping and chittering. Paula falls back—*What the fuck?*—stumbling into Jodi. Jodi is stunned but laughing too.

"Bats," she says. "They come up this time of night, out of the crevices and caves."



AFTER CHURCH

LINDSAY HUNTER

A man was cutting his grass. The smell was both pungent and dear, the mower wailing like a child lost in a mall, loud and unabashed. Work was being done, the taming of the wild green of summer. All the long ash-gray winter, the yearning for color, for bright! But only until just before it gets unruly. Then, something must be done.

Fuck that man! The thought entered and exited hurriedly, embarrassed. Fuck ruly! Fuck tamed. In and out these thoughts rushed, like bowing maidens in a cuckoo clock. I felt a smile bloom across my face. Bloom! Life was everywhere, and if I came upon a genie I'd wish it weren't. And then I'd squash that genie between thumb and forefinger like a gnat, *plimp!*

A woman in a shapeless denim item approached. She saw the smile, returned one of her own. Gross! I thought. "Well, hello, Jean!" I said. I remembered her name was Jean on account of the denim.

"Hot one!" she blurted. She walked on the outsides of her feet, I noticed, a torturous yet graceful lumbering, and I recognized it as a symptom of thigh chafe. Were we close enough acquaintances for me to confess that I rubbed Crisco between my legs before venturing out?

"Sure is," I said, glancing purposefully at the approximation of her crotch. I wanted her to ask for a tip. I couldn't offer one; we were not actually close enough. Instead she slouched next to me on the bench. It's a free country and all that.

"Beautiful sermon," she moaned, the way one does when mouthing

flourless chocolate cake, or after coming demurely underneath a panting man. “I loved what he said about recognizing yourself in others’ strifes.”

Strifes! Lord.

“I don’t remember that part,” I said honestly. In truth I had been using the golf pencil they handed you along with the program to cross out every instance of the word “and” in the Bible I’d worked out of the seatback pocket. It really changes the gist of things in an enjoyable way. I remember the pastor’s voice breaking when he shouted something about “Your soul!” Likely he was talking about the fight for said soul. Why was it always a fight? Why couldn’t we just be pliant, prone, like the maroon carpet in the foyer, collecting footprints and donut crumbs and shards of golf pencil, watching others fight from our comfy spot on the floor?

“That’s okay,” Jean said, and reached over and patted my knee. “We know you’ve been through a lot.”

“What do you know?” I said. I meant it sincerely. What did she know; who told her? But it came out like, *Bitch, what do YOU know?*

“All that matters is you showed up today. Just keep showing up.” Her hand on my knee was soft and plump, the way I imagine Mickey Mouse’s glove would feel. A shudder ran through me and I clenched down, worried my bowels would give.

“I don’t really prefer being touched,” I said. My head felt hollow and I realized the man had stopped mowing.

“I get it, I get it,” Jean said, and patted my knee again. “Well,” she said, pushing up. I smelled her sweat, a clean chickeny smell. “My number’s in the directory. I can even receive text messages at it. Any time, day or night. I don’t sleep much, never have.” She wandered off, to the clump of jerks perched over the rickety table

of stale cookies and perspiring cheeses. They all turned and looked at me, maws grinding. Jean waved. I waved back, because waving back is an involuntary motion out of anyone's control.

I was crying. Goddammit.

Now the man had the weed whacker out, a much more furious device. I put on my sunglasses and it helped. The world was less colorful, less loud. The world was less. A cloud passed over the sun and I felt like I'd been given cover. I was able to stand, to start walking.

Get out of your comfort zone, Dave always said, before he went. Okay, okay, dipshit! Here I go. I had a plan: cheeses, cookie, small talk.

The man had turned on the sprinklers now, warm flecks brushing my face and arms. Refreshing! I forced myself to pretend. Jean waved her arms. Too much, I would tell her if we were closer. You ain't setting off on the Titanic! Now she was running at me. I braced myself for a hug, but she barreled past.

"My God!" someone shouted.

"Amen!" I responded, fully out of my comfort zone.

Now there were many screams. A collage of hollering. And one man off in the distance falling to his knees. Was this some kind of rapture cosplay? Who was playing Jesus? What was I expected to do?

I felt the plump Mickey glove on my arm, spinning me around. "It's bad!" Jean huffed. She had smears of red on her arms, a big splotch across her denim number. "Call for an ambulance." She let go and ran off and I saw her handprint on my arm, bright red and smudged. Blood of Christ?

But it was the man. He'd weed-whacked through his cheap workboots. Jean had one of his legs in a headlock, trying to stop the flow of blood. The man held tight to the brim of his ballcap, as though the top of his head were in danger of rocketing off. He had his eyes squeezed shut. Don't look and it won't be real; I could relate.

"I know what to do," I said, thinking of Dave, never not thinking of Dave. Then I said it louder. Jean seemed grateful. "It's okay." Church was always Dave's thing, and now it was where I felt closest to him. I put my hand on the man's other leg, its warm wetness horrible and familiar. "He'll tell us what to do," I said to Jean, to all of them. For once I felt a kinship to them, to the blind way they groped around for a voice answering back. It was there, close, just out of reach. Jean was nodding not so much at me as into me. I was saying something she needed, praise be. A man known for the prominent chest hair fronding at his neck was dry heaving by the shrubs, his hand delicate at his throat. So human and alive. Dave vomited often in the final days, thick black tar dribbling from his lips. Living was a series of indignities. Death was life's only grace. I opened my mouth and let fly.

"He won't abandon us in our time of need," I said, choking down a— what was it? A sob? No, a laugh. I held it down, my own humanity, even as I heard someone mutter, "Who?"



ART

Sabra Embury, GAZE (paper collage)	Cover
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"The Porch" is an excerpt from a novel-in-progress.

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"What is Sacred" was originally published in *Midnight Breakfast*.

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"Because the Air is Lavender and Wine" was originally published in *Raleigh Review*.

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"Notes from Altura Mental Hospital" is an excerpt from *'Juliet the Maniac.'*

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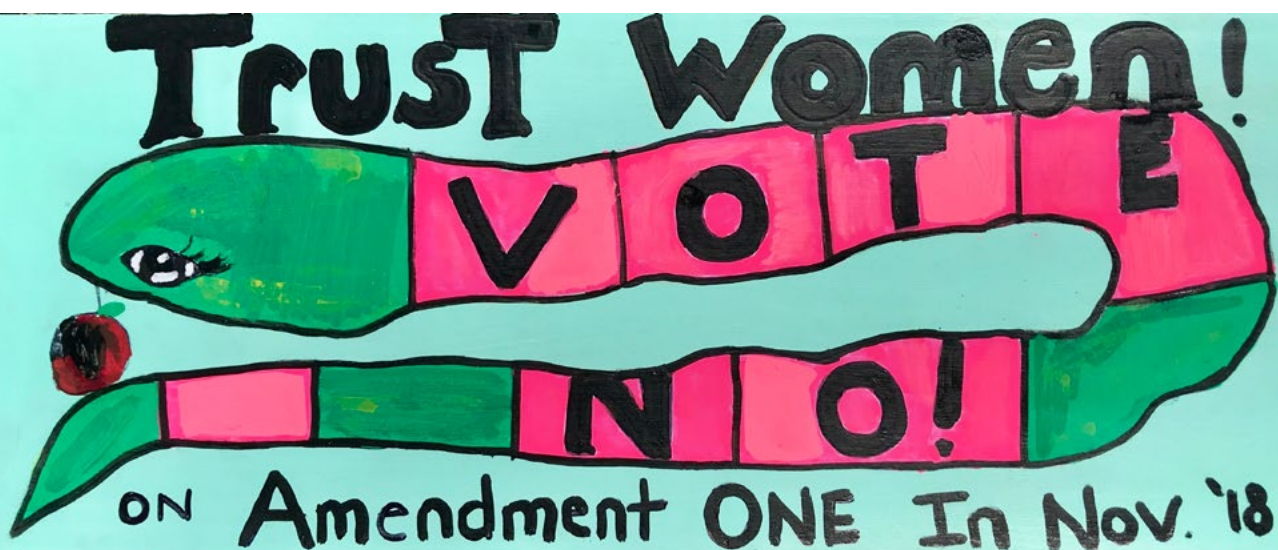
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